

Bibliophile Princess: Volume 5

Yui

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Bibliophile Princess 5

Dreaming of Winter's End

Author: Yui
Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena

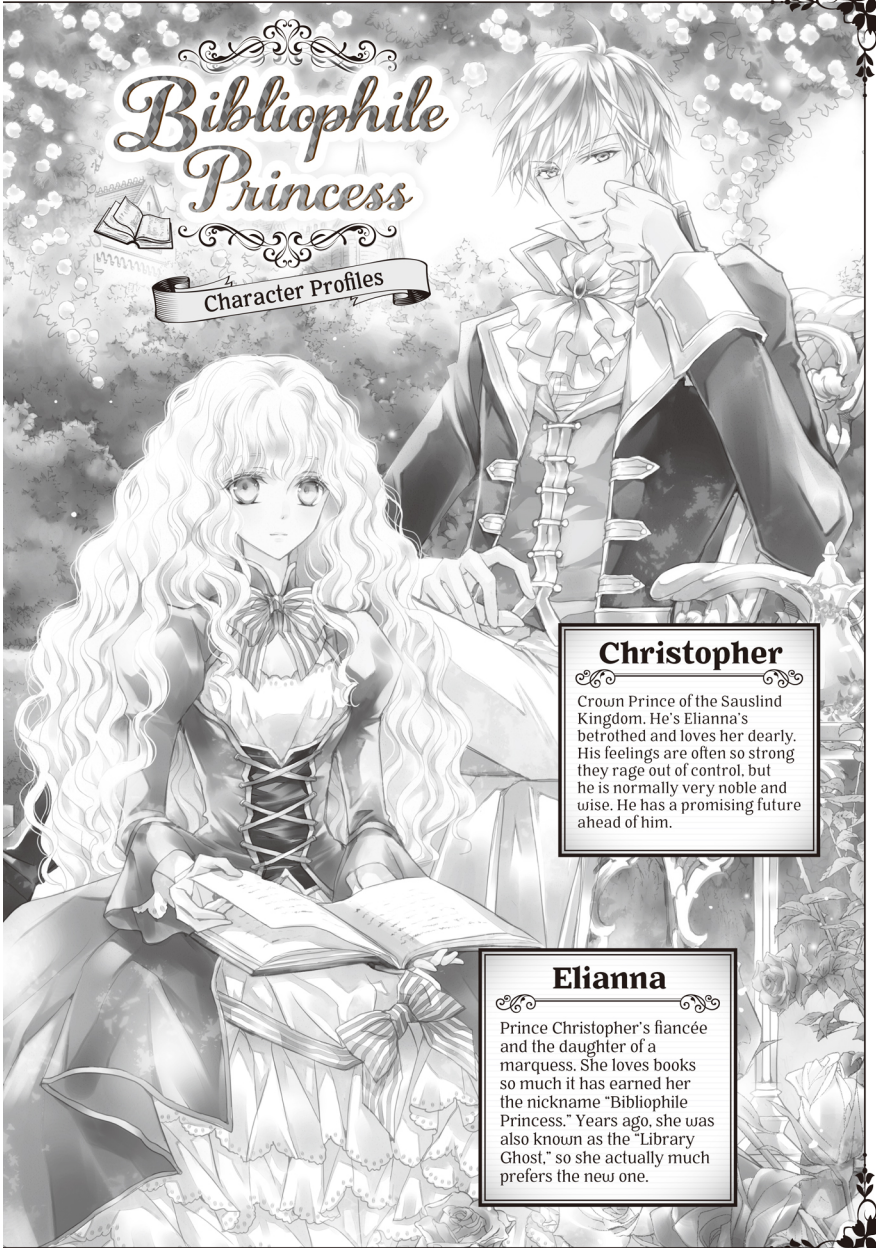
The illustration depicts a young man and woman in a grand, gothic-style interior. The man, on the left, has long blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a white military-style coat with gold trim and a blue sash. He holds the hand of a young woman on the right. She has long, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing a pink and white Victorian-style dress with ruffles. She holds a small, ornate red book. The background features large, arched windows with intricate tracery. The title 'Bibliophile Princess' is written in a large, pink, cursive font, with a large orange number '5' to its right. A small open book floats above the woman's head.

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Bibliophile Princess

Character Profiles

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sausland Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago, she was also known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers the new one.



Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet, "Ice Scion."

Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Theodore

Younger brother of the reigning king of Sauslind and Christopher's uncle. He's a popular and charismatic man in the prime of his life but is still single.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.

Lilia

Elianna's cousin, who currently serves as her maid in the palace.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as Sauslind's Brain. A very important family. When they last appeared out in the open and assisted during a previous king's reign, the country flourished.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sauslind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sauslind. Known as a maritime nation.

The Ashen Nightmare

A plague that once swept over Sauslind. A cure has yet to be found for it.

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Arc 1: Dreaming of Winter's End

Chapter 1: The Prince's Test

It was an overcast day, where only a thin stream of sunlight managed to find its way through the gaps of gray clouds. The blizzard continued without letting up. Those in the palace feared the Malduran delegation would be delayed, but as if purposefully aiming to catch Sauslind off guard, they arrived earlier than anticipated.

Since Maldura's winters were even more frigid than Sauslind's, they were all dressed in thick layers. The garments themselves were formal, albeit without mantles attached, but in an apparent display of wealth, they were made from extremely expensive material. Their extravagant appearance made the delegates too intimidating for most normal people to approach.

Ordinarily the palace's audience chamber was only open for special ceremonies, but this was a unique occasion. The most prominent nobles and ministers—anyone with influence in the kingdom—were gathered inside. It wouldn't be an overstatement to call these people the backbone of Sauslind's political power. And yet, these sly old foxes gaped when they laid eyes upon the man representing the Malduran delegation.

The foreign prince stopped at the foot of the stairs leading to the throne, the spot where other nobles ordinarily paid their respects. He moved without an ounce of hesitation. Judging by his appearance, he was in his mid-twenties. The atmosphere around him and his general demeanor were so warm and inviting it was almost a disappointment—completely contrary to people's impressions of Maldura. He had a lean, wiry frame and slightly curly black hair. Even under the scrutinizing gazes of the Sauslind elite, he looked perfectly relaxed. The smile on his face was ambiguous and difficult to read.

In response to the king's welcome, the foreign prince gave a fluttering bow. "Likewise, it is an honor to make your acquaintance, King William of Sauslind. I am the second prince of Maldura, Reglisse Carranza, son of King Orzeno." By Sauslind's standards, his manners were a bit peculiar. Nonetheless, his gentle expression concealed any tension he might be feeling, and he moved with grace, showing no signs that the crowd's attention unnerved him. He proudly lifted his head after bowing, his eyelids still shut.

Maldura's prince was blind.

This revelation stunned the nobles. If I hadn't been informed

beforehand, I might have gawked like they were doing. Instead, I was surveying the people around the prince.

Ian, of the Black Wing Knights, had already informed me of the prince's disability, but the way Prince Reglisse conducted himself almost made me question whether those eyes really were blind. Pretender or not, the man was dignified enough to silence anyone who might have mocked him for his handicap.

So this is the man slated to be the next king of Maldura, I thought as I scrutinized him, surprised.

The king and queen exchanged some formal conversation with him before Father turned to me. "During your stay here in Sauslind, my son will be the one keeping you entertained. I hope the two of you will be able to form a strong friendship, given that you will both be leading countries in the future. Chris?"

At his prompt, I stepped forward. All the eyes that had been gathered on the foreign prince now focused on me instead. I had an air of royalty about me, I could tell—whether Reglisse could see it or not. I had my family's characteristic golden blonde hair and sky blue eyes. I was so used to being the center of attention that pride oozed from me, as was only fitting for someone of my position. It was something my mother had drilled into me since I was a child, and it was far too late to change it now.

I knew from experience the effect my presence and appearance had on other people. The other members of the foreign delegation, as well as the nobles from Sauslind, were either overwhelmed by my company or captivated enough to hide any hostility they may have otherwise felt.

A smile spread across my face. "I am Sauslind's crown prince, Christopher Selkirk Ashelard. Your travels have brought you far. I heartily welcome you to my home. Considering how close we are in age, I hope we can use this opportunity to grow closer to one another."

Despite his inability to see, Prince Reglisse turned his face directly toward me. Either his hearing was that keen or he had a knack for sensing a person's presence.

He gave another fluttering bow and introduced himself once more. There was a trace of a smile on the edges of his lips. After stating his name again, he then said, "I hear you're the pride of Sauslind. You're even famous in other countries for being noble and wise. There have been rumors of you for quite some time now." His voice carried a subtle barb that only a few people present reacted to.

I continued smiling, as I always did, and replied, "Yes, well, rumors do tend to take on a life of their own, but I will be careful not to betray people's good impressions of me. That said, rumors often

carry the biases of whoever speaks them. I am more intrigued by what they call you in Maldura: ‘God’s Beloved Prince.’ I’ll be sure to evaluate how accurate that name is with my own eyes.” I glanced over at him, but Prince Reglisse only gave a gentle smile. It was the nobles standing a few steps behind him who seemed taken aback.

Before Sauslind’s higher-ups could break out into whispers, Father uttered some platitudes and drew our formal welcome of the Malduran delegation to a close. Real diplomacy, where veteran aristocrats from both sides would mingle and do their secret maneuvering, was planned for later.



One obvious method for diplomacy was to socialize. With that in mind, I invited the Malduran delegation to an evening party. Spring was the real season for such mingling, but even though it was still winter, the special circumstances prompted an even larger turnout than I’d anticipated. Sauslind’s people still had a deep-seated aversion to Maldura—that hadn’t changed—but this was a rare and unusual occasion. People were prioritizing their curiosity over their caution.

I, of course, was the host for the evening’s festivities. I knew most of the nobility were less than fond of Maldura, so to entertain our foreign visitors, I invited a range of people from outside the aristocracy. There were young people who had just reached adulthood, mid-rank civil officials who had their hands deep in national politics, and middle-aged merchants who were the heads of their own companies.

The Malduran delegation was already fitting in well with the other attendees.

“The Epic of Elbara. It’s beloved by the people as a poem depicting the founding of our nation. It’s about as famous as Sauslind’s Hero King,” said Prince Reglisse. Out of concern for his disability, he had a special maid and guards attached to him. He was still unmarried and had made it apparent that he’d yet to settle on an engagement.

The person engaging him in conversation was Lady Anna Hayden, daughter of Earl Hayden. Said earl was also known as the Guardian God of the West, and he oversaw one of our border regions, the Edea Domain. Lady Anna was dressed in evening attire, and her eyes radiated with an inner strength that mirrored her father’s.

“The Epic of Elbara is said to be based on Ryzanity,” she said. “Elbara was the one who established Maldura. In other words, your founding king was a follower of Ryza. That’s why Ryzanity has become the national religion for Maldura, yes?”

Lady Anna displayed an extraordinary level of knowledge of history, which seemed oddly out of place at an evening party.

Nonetheless, the man escorting her was no less knowledgeable as he smiled and cut in. “No, that’s not necessarily true. There are two theories about the Epic of Elbara. One is that it originated in the fallen empire, and the other is that it started as a folktale. It’s a bit too narrow-minded to discuss history solely from a religious perspective, Lady Anna.”

The man who refuted her was Elianna’s older brother, Alfred Bernstein. He was also an aide to the prime minister. As was characteristic of the Bernsteins, Alfred didn’t normally take part in social functions like this, but this time, he had gone out of his way to make his presence known. He was here as a sort of stand-in for his absent sister, lest the foreign delegation or the other Sauslind nobles forget her or her determination to establish peace between our nations.

Prince Reglisse smiled warmly. “I heard that Sauslind has a number of scholars who are knowledgeable about other countries and their histories, but I’m surprised you have female civil officials. My country could stand to learn from your example.”

Lady Anna hesitated to respond, embarrassed to be seen as a pioneer of female academics. “Even in Sauslind, there aren’t very many like me. The only reason I was able to obtain this position was thanks to Lady Elianna’s suggestion.”

“Aha.” The prince’s smile broadened. “The crown prince’s fiancée, yes. My country owes her a debt of gratitude as well. I would have loved to meet her. It’s a shame she couldn’t be here.”

Up until this point, I had only listened in on the conversation from the background, exchanging pleasantries with other guests, but Prince Reglisse’s voice was filled with so much emotion it drew my attention. My smile grew even wider hearing my beloved’s name.

“Elianna also had a deep desire to meet with you and your delegation,” I said, turning around to face him. “Unfortunately, since she will be crown princess soon, she is very busy. I am terribly sorry she couldn’t be here to speak with you, but please know, the rest of us here share her desire for peace.”

My confident declaration prompted a smile from Alfred, and Lady Anna blinked a few times before grinning as well. The two of them weren’t officially engaged as of yet, but the future looked promising for them.

Encouraged by my statement, Alfred led Prince Reglisse and the other civil officials into a discussion about history. When the chance presented itself, he casually shot questions at the foreign prince to fish for information regarding the state of their domestic affairs.

There were two other nobles from the Malduran delegation at the party as well.

“So, lovers here gaze at the stars together as they talk? Sauslind couples sure are romantic. Winters are so harsh in our country that if you went outside to stargaze at this time of year, you’d turn into a frozen statue.” One of them was Earl Gilhan, a handsome, vibrant man who was so cheerful and sincere it coaxed smiles out of everyone, drawing in young men and women alike. He was in his early forties, and though he had a playful, frivolous atmosphere about him, his conversational skills were perfectly suited to diplomacy.

“In that case, how do lovers in Maldura sneak around to meet each other?”

Earl Gilhan hummed, giving a meaningful grin to fan the inquirer’s curiosity. “In Maldura, we have what are called ‘Star Gems.’ The name refers to the vast number of gemstones found in Maldura’s underground springs that sparkle when the light hits them. They look like stars in the night sky. We have a lot of mines, and those gems hidden deep underground are more valuable than anything else in the world.”

“Wow!” The young men and women gathered around him leaned forward, intrigued by the idea of these shiny foreign stones.

Earl Gilhan turned his handsome smile on one of the girls who was staring dreamily at him. “I question how tactful it is to draw such a comparison to women, but even jewels are little more than useless stones until you polish them. There’s nothing more valuable than finding a diamond amidst all the rubble, is there? I’m sure that’s the same for every country. In Maldura, we call them ‘Star Gems.’ Because they’re like lights that illuminate our home in the frigid cold of winter.”

The way he said it implied that although Maldura’s winters were harsh, the country shone like a beacon in the dark. The evocative description was enough to make the girl picture it vividly in her mind. He continued his romantic tales, and not to be bested, the Sauslind youths joined in with their own stories.

I turned my attention away from him and his group, tuning my ears into another gathering of people.

“The western countries’ bronze and iron works are a surprising sight to behold. From the east, we are seeing more artistic imports. The west and their exceptional technology have Maldura to thank for providing such resources. I would love for Sauslind’s engineers to learn by the other western countries’ examples,” said Earl Ardolino, one of the most prominent tradesmen in Sauslind. His wife was Alexei’s younger sister, Therese.

The man he was speaking with looked to be in his mid-thirties and was rather frail. He was a relative of Prince Reglisse and had only recently succeeded his father’s title. His name was Earl Valmore. One

might expect the power that came with his new appointment to go to his head, but neither the man's clothes nor his appearance matched his status. He acted timid and restless, surveying his surroundings. It made him seem like a novice who had no place being involved with diplomacy, but...

"Western iron crafting is more suited to bridge and boat construction—b-basically any large objects. I have a keen interest in the east's intricate craftsmanship a-and Sauslind's refined techniques as well."

Though he gave off the impression of being unmotivated and unconfident, he had a keen insight into what was necessary to make the best use of his country's resources and what other nations were specializing in. He, Earl Ardolino, and the rest of the merchants launched into a deep conversation about Maldura's iron manufacturing and trade circulation. Given how isolationist Maldura was, this was a key opportunity to develop good relations with them for commercial purposes, so many in the group were eager to discuss future opportunities.

After ensuring they were off to a good start, I left them behind and made my way around the event venue. There were two people tagging along behind me: Glen, who was acting as my bodyguard, and the civil official attending in Alexei's place.

Ordinarily, since I was the crown prince, guests would go out of their way to come to me and pay their respects. However, since this was taking place in the palace's reception hall and our primary objective was to conduct diplomacy, those invited were more enticed to approach Maldura's delegation. That was only natural, of course. However...

"Prince Christopher, good evening."

The moment I tried to wander the hall, the usual nuisances made their approach. Most were noblemen dragging their daughters along with them. It was always the same girls. When I first saw them years ago they were single and available, but they still chose to appear even now that they were engaged. This was primarily because up until this past spring, Elianna had rarely attended social functions.

Their objective was clear: they wanted to garner the attention of the crown prince. If they were lucky, they might be able to become a concubine and leverage their influence to push Elianna out, taking the position of crown princess for themselves. Since the date of our wedding was announced, most such women had given up. They only attempted it now because they saw Elianna's absence as an opportunity.

No matter how much I tried to rebuff them, there was no end to it. Tonight would not be the first or last time I had to deal with this,

either. Some of the girls were being forced into it by their fathers and couldn't disobey if they wanted to. As I watched them try to flatter and cajole me, I recalled the doubt I'd held when I was younger. Why couldn't the people wasting their time kissing up to me be more like the people whose eyes lit up with curiosity when speaking to the Maldurans?

As I smiled, mentally categorizing the crowd around me, a voice murmured behind me, "This is another consequence of Alex's absence. Even without Lady Elianna present, Alex's stone cold gaze drove off anyone reckless enough to approach. He basically froze them with one look and kept them at bay."

"That makes sense," Glen responded, nodding to himself. "Even the prince can't beat the ice demon's piercingly cold glare."

I wasn't sure if I should interpret that as a compliment or not, but either way, it was a stupid comment.

The civil official's style of speech resembled Alex's as he replied, "Indeed. According to Lord Alexei, it's easy to squash families like House Dauner who are obvious in their approach. Those lords from a moment ago will be meeting the same fate, I'm sure."

"No kidding. Get on the demon lord's bad side and you won't survive in this country. Either he'll turn you to stone or your house will fall to ruin. Which would you pick if you had the option?"

"Oh, come now, you act as if they're on a path of no return. Life is like a game of chess. If you can turn the tables in a single move, who wouldn't take the risk of trying?"

"Now is a prime opportunity because the Goddess of Luck is absent."

They continued flapping their lips in the background, and I tuned them out. As I scanned the venue, my eyes narrowed sharply.

We couldn't allow the bodyguards who'd accompanied the Malduran delegation to attend the event. To guarantee the safety of their prince and keep up appearances, Ian and a few of the other Black Wing Knights were posted inside for security. However, seeing my uncle on my mother's side conversing with the Black Wing Knight's commander, I wasn't confident they could be trusted. Maldura wasn't the only issue we were dealing with here, hence my hackles raising.

I continued to field people's warm wishes and greetings as they came to pay their respects, but my thoughts were running elsewhere. The father and daughter in front of me were speaking of matters entirely unrelated to the diplomatic nature of the party. The lord was making an unsubtle invitation for me to spend a night with his daughter. For her part, the girl in question meekly maintained her distance, but her furtive glances made it obvious she wasn't opposed to the idea.

The temperature around me fell drastically as my annoyance mounted. "So that's what you're here for," I whispered quietly, my gaze chilling enough to freeze the man, his daughter, and Glen in place. Nonetheless, I offered them a smile befitting my nickname as the kingdom's handsome prince. "If I'm understanding you correctly, your daughter is knowledgeable about the history of our northwestern neighbors, and she wants to offer herself up in service of the country, yes? In that case, I will gladly take that into consideration." I emphasized it in such a way as to imply I might use her as a pawn to perform reconnaissance with the Maldurans. That was enough to make the pair blanch in dismay.

"N-No, as much as we appreciate the consideration, we could never..." The man muttered incoherently before speeding off with his daughter in tow. Obviously he was willing to hand her over as a concubine, but he had no intention of letting her become a spy to investigate Maldura.

I inwardly clicked my tongue in annoyance.

"Uh, Your Highness?" Glen said hesitantly, speaking respectfully to me since we were in public. "I realize it's out of character for me to say this, but uh...I think I'm the only one here who can..."

He was right; it was odd for him to admonish me like this. "I know. You don't need to say it," I said, suppressing my annoyance.

What I suspected he wanted to say was, "We have gone to all this trouble to work toward diplomacy with Maldura. As the host of the event and the crown prince, it only undermines people's faith in this going well if you're in a bad mood." If Alex were here, he would probably have even more scathing criticism for me than that. While I understood I needed to remain calm, my irritation only continued to swell past the point of restraint.

Glen tried and failed to hide his mirth as he chuckled. "Seriously, you know you're way too easy to read. I can tell you're even more pissed now than you were a minute ago. It's so clear you're trying to pretend to be calm even though you're actually annoyed, and your replies all tend to sound the same. Pfft..." He was desperately trying to keep himself from bursting into laughter.

A smile teased at my lips—a genuine one this time.

Before I could turn my back on him, Glen muttered something he never should have never said. "You're way too on edge when Lady Elianna's not here. You need to learn to calm down more."

Ah, yes, it seems you not only want me to turn you into an ice statue, but you also want me to chase off all the women around you so you can live a life of complete abstinence. Don't worry, I'm more than happy to oblige such a request.

A maniacal grin spread across my face. Having sensed the change,

Alexei's subordinate retreated a few steps. Even Glen flinched when he realized what he'd done.

Fortunately for his sake, another lamb volunteered themselves for the slaughter by calling out to me. "Oh, if it isn't Prince Christopher." It was a group of middle-status nobles who came happily scurrying over.

Again, I inwardly clicked my tongue. I recited my usual greetings and kept the same mask on my face I always did as I responded to them.

One of them immediately began praising the event. "This evening party has been quite lively. You invited a lot of young people, from nobles, to officials, to merchants... The latter was especially surprising. Instead of inviting leaders of large companies, you chose average tradesmen. My, my, Your Highness. You sure have connections with a vast number of people. I'm even more impressed with you than I was before." This cunning, shrewd man was a noble involved in overseas commerce.

"Indeed," agreed another man in his mid-fifties who acted as a representative for their group. His name was Earl Brandt. Incidentally, he was at the top of a list of aristocrats who had taken advantage of Alex's absence just days earlier to come marching into my office. "Having so many youths does bring an evening party to life. I suppose that's an indication of their reckless enthusiasm and passion. Oh, no, forgive me. For an old man such as myself, their light is a bit blinding—almost like the sun."

If only it could truly blind you. That would be a blessing. I smiled and let his words go in one ear and out the other, summoning what little dignity and composure I could to bite back the urge to cringe at these insignificant fools.

In a shamelessly obvious display, Earl Brandt turned his gaze to the empty spot beside me. "Still, it must be lonely for you to be unoccupied at such an animated party. This is a landmark event in our step toward diplomacy with Maldura. You should have a fitting lady to accompany you." He then shot a look across the dance hall.

Standing there in a gown that glimmered in the light was a young lady with reddish-brown hair. She was dancing with one of the delegation members. Along with Therese and my betrothed, Elianna, she was considered to be one of the top female representatives of her generation. Her name was Pharmia, and since she was the daughter of Duke Odin, that made her my cousin. She lacked the haughty attitude one might expect from the niece of the queen, and she didn't share Therese's ambition to be a driving force in high society, either. Pharmia was meek, keeping several steps behind everyone with a smile on her face.

We were well enough acquainted, at least in the past, for me to know she wasn't like her father, either.

I ignored the implication of Earl Brandt's comment and paid my usual lip service. "I realize you must be speaking out of concern for me since my betrothed is off on another errand and couldn't attend. However, since our wedding date has already been arranged, I have no intention of making a reputation for myself as a man who's unfaithful to his bride." I narrowed my eyes at him, lips thinning in an even wider smile. "Or do you think our country desires a crown prince who would tarnish his kingdom's reputation like that?"



The unspoken implication of my words was, “You would dare make such a suggestion as a noble who professes his loyalty to the kingdom?”

Earl Brandt flinched.

I kept my gaze fixed on him. “My mother has her eyes on Lady Pharmia as well. But whatever engagement she settles on, whether by my mother’s recommendation or not, I will pray for her happiness as I would any other citizen of Sauslind.” The warning in my voice was clear; I had no intention of involving myself with Pharmia beyond that.

Earl Brandt’s face grew tense. His lips twitched as if he wanted to say something.

I smiled at him and promptly left. Once there was some distance between us, I glanced at Alexei’s subordinate and asked him whether he’d confirmed the faces of those present during our conversation.

Realizing it was safe again, he quickened his pace to bridge the gap between us and answered calmly. “All of the nobles who approached with their daughters were from Duke Odin’s faction or some branch thereof.”

“Oh, huh, interesting,” Glen mumbled as if he only got the gist of what was going on.

I masked my dismay at him and nodded at Alex’s subordinate. “I suspected as much.” When those around us called out to me in greeting, I flashed them a smile.

The response to Elianna’s absence wasn’t entirely surprising, but the boldness of those approaching left me suspicious. Their objective was clear. However, we had spent years building up Elianna’s reputation. Did the opposition really possess a trump card that could turn the tides of battle instantly? If they did, what exactly was it? And what were they *really* after?

As I pondered, music began playing behind me. I sighed inwardly. There was far too much for me to contemplate. First we had the militaristic faction who viewed Maldura as an enemy. I had spotted a few of them present at the evening party, but unsurprisingly, none of them dared make a move out in the open here.

Those who clamored for power were restless in their pursuit, trying to aim for the crown princess’s seat. By using Elianna as an excuse to rebuff them, I was only making her a target. Our wedding day was now set at least, so trying to intervene would mean going against the will of the kingdom. Nonetheless, there were still reckless individuals who thought they might stand a chance with Elianna out of the picture. But would they really be so foolish as to act on that? She had the support of the people. I was fairly certain none of them

could act too carelessly.

Before I knew it, my hand was curled into a tight fist. My lips moved to the sound of her name without ever speaking it. *Eli*. At this rate, I might have to pass judgment on Elianna's friend during her absence. When she learned about it afterward, would it strain our relationship? Would she be disgusted with me?

My knuckles turned white as I clenched my fist even harder. I had already come too far to turn back now.

It wasn't as if Pharmia hadn't had plenty of time. Five whole years and numerous opportunities. During that time, she had refused to tie herself to anyone and remained unmarried. Was that of her own volition? Or was it because of her father's thirst for power?

There was no more time for debating. I had to make my move. The political game was already in motion.

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When I called out to Prince Reglisse, who was sitting in the rest area facing the event venue, he peered up from his sofa. He tried to stand out of respect, but I stopped him. "Please, stay seated." I also shot a look over at his maid.

He gave a bitter sigh as he leaned back against the couch, turning a smile my way. "My apologies for calling you out here, Prince Christopher."

"Not at all." As I slipped inside, Glen and Alex's subordinate tried to follow me in, but I motioned for them to wait at the entrance.

While I was making my rounds at the party earlier, a chamberlain had approached me to inform me that Prince Reglisse was exhausted and taking a break here.

"I should be the one apologizing for not showing more consideration. I do hope you will forgive me for my rudeness," I said. Being blind, it must have exhausted him mentally and physically to stand around on such a crowded floor for so long.

The prince chuckled. "Sauslind's crown prince is far more straightforward than I've been led to believe. The stories I heard of you painted you in an entirely different light." He spoke frankly and laughed once more.

"Mind if I sit beside you?" I asked. After he nodded, I settled down next to him.

There were only two other people in the room: his maid and a bodyguard. Since this lounge faced the party floor, it was just another area for people to socialize. There was nothing to keep it hidden from prying eyes. It wasn't the kind of place you could confer without other ears listening in. The fact that he'd called me here despite all of that was proof the foreign prince was impatient. He didn't have the luxury

of indulging in social overtures.

“Prince Christopher, you are already well aware of our reason for coming to visit, are you not?” He was blunt with his question, not wasting a moment beating around the bush.

On reflex, I offered him the same smile I gave all the other nobles. He couldn’t see my expression, but he seemed to sense my reaction and sighed quietly.

“I see your reputation holds true. My younger brother was correct. The only person we can hope to negotiate with is Lady Elianna.”

My brow twitched.

Prince Reglisse smiled, but his expression was unreadable. “Tell me, did you send Lady Elianna away from the palace because you knew what our objective was?” He was unashamedly confessing their true purpose: a face-to-face meeting with Elianna.

Of course. The older brother is no different from the younger one.

“There seems to be some kind of misunderstanding here,” I said, my voice more deep and intimidating this time. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the Malduran maid and bodyguard flinch. Even Glen was sending me a chastising look. I ignored them all and continued. “As I already informed you, our future crown princess is currently away on official business. It’s entirely unrelated to the Malduran delegation’s visit. If you have a message for her, I will gladly receive it in her place.” My underlying message was, “Don’t try to use her as a bargaining chip here.”

Prince Reglisse fell silent for a few moments. “I see,” he whispered after a long pause. The atmosphere around him suddenly changed. No longer was he calm and relaxed. There was now a subtle chill in the air. “I understand. It’s impolite to make demands without showing one’s hand. Allow me to ask you, then, Prince Christopher, what is it that you desire?” His eyes were closed, and yet I could feel his gaze pierce me as if he were staring directly into my soul.

So this is the kind of person you are.

My impression of him changed. He was more capable than I thought.

He said they only stood a chance of negotiating with Elianna. They owed her a debt of gratitude, which was why they wanted to meet her directly. I had no doubt they wanted to manipulate her for their own gain. Knowing Elianna, she would never abandon anyone who came to ask her for help. Especially when it involved the illness that had stolen her mother from her. She would probably take into account the possibility of it spreading to Sauslind as well and insist on helping the Maldurans. However, without her here to appeal to, what would they do instead?

I remained silent, carefully planning what I would say so my

words didn't betray what I was thinking. Slowly, I leaned my back against the couch and casually glanced out at the party floor. For a split second, I caught a glimpse of auburn eyes amidst the crowd.

I'm going to choose a different path than you walked. Even if that goes against what you want, I thought.

After a short exhale, I composed myself and crossed my legs. "You said you want to know what I desire, but that would require you to have someone on your side capable of granting my wish. Otherwise there's no negotiating, is there?"

His lips pulled into a leisurely smile. "I can tell from tonight's party that your wish aligns with another one of our objectives in coming here. You're the type who can throw a net and pull in a vast number of fish—your abilities are impressive. That is why I felt inclined to ask you what it is you desire from our country." His eyes, though still closed, seemed to be scrutinizing me. "Prince Christopher, what would you say if I told you it won't be long before your *treasure* falls into our hands?"

My eyes turned hard, radiating murderous intent. The tense shift in the atmosphere had the other two Maldurans recoiling. Glen was now not only staring at me but had his entire torso turned my way.

Calm down, I told myself over and over again. It was my own inexperience that had led me to react out of instinct. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I did feel impatient and uneasy not having Elianna within my reach. The more the days passed, the more I lost my composure.

While I tried to soothe myself, Prince Reglisse continued to sit there, entirely unaffected. He showed no emotion at all—neither pitying nor mocking me.

A small breath slipped past my lips. It was clear what he was referring to when he spoke of my treasure. People had pointed out to me before that I had a dangerous habit of losing all control when it came to Elianna. Those rotten tanuki had been especially snide as they pointed it out.

"That level of obsession in a ruler is just a weakness," they had said. As well as, "Some people are big enough birdbrains to *willingly* entrust their daughters to young men who can't fully protect them. Can't say I understand where they're coming from."

At the time, Alexei had looked utterly confused, like a dog who'd been one-upped by a cat. Similarly, Glen looked as dumbfounded as a doe caught in a hunter's trap. Recalling how ridiculous their faces were helped calm my nerves. The palace truly did resemble the animal menagerie Eli had fondly read about in her books.

I offered the same practiced smile I always used. "In that case," I said, voice low and threatening, "we will just have to respond in kind."

It seems what your younger brother told me about you can't be trusted after all."

Or rather, the country you represent can't be trusted.

The implied meaning made his lips twitch with amusement. "Ah, you have found my weak spot, I'm afraid." Despite his unassuming appearance, this man was not to be underestimated.

I resisted the urge to scoff. The way he played the situation made it seem as if he was impatient, but just as quickly he shrouded his true intentions in a cloud of smoke. He reminded me of the tanukis. Clearly, the burdens we bore were entirely different. His younger brother had insisted the second prince didn't want to go to war with Sauslind. But if it meant protecting what was important to them, they had no compunction about using Elianna as a hostage to see that their demands were met.

Is he really prepared to go that far? Or is he purposely pushing me to see how I'll react?

As I pondered his true intentions, I glanced at the maid he had with him. She had black hair, her bangs pulled over her face to hide part of it. What makeup she wore was subdued enough to make sure she didn't stand out, but scrutinizing her closely, I recognized those facial features. She resembled Irvin's handsome servant, but they weren't the same person.

"Prince Reglisse, where are your eyes?" I asked, frank in my approach.

His grin widened. "My eyes, you ask?" He echoed my question almost mischievously, reading the implied meaning and laughing. "I'm afraid my eyes don't like to settle down anywhere. They're rather fickle that way. If you try to tie them down, they tend to run. Better to let them move freely. Oddly, in spite of their capricious nature, they have a great inner strength and a talent for pushing people into action."

He paused, humming to himself. "Ah, I see. Yes, a girl who has only ever immersed herself in the world of books might be captivated by someone from an unfamiliar, foreign country. Let's hope that's not that case."

The blind prince's gentle expression was enough to solidify my evaluation of him.

This man is an enemy.

I also kept a smile plastered on my face, and the two of us exchanged pleasantries without ever really touching upon our true motives.

Two days later, before the sun had even risen, one of the royal family's chamberlains came bursting into my room. "His Majesty has

collapsed!”

That, coupled with the successive incidents that followed, had the blood draining from my face.

Now I see. Father was their target.

I gritted my teeth, vexed at how foolish I had been not to anticipate this. As my regret culminated, I muttered, “So that’s how far they’re willing to go...”

The anger I felt was directed more at my own naivety than at the culprit behind all of this.

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“...and this is exactly why I was opposed to it!”

A very limited number of senior officials were gathered in the palace’s assembly room, where one of them was bellowing their opinion to the rest of us.

“Welcoming Maldura’s delegation here was unfathomable! They’re a bunch of brainless barbarians after Sauslind’s wealth. In fact, look at them—they’re already spreading the plague in our country. How do you plan to take responsibility for this scandal, Prince Christopher?!”

The man was, for all intents and purposes, a noble within the military aligned with the militaristic faction—or, more simply put, the pro-war faction.

It was still early morning here in the capital, but already the palace was in an uproar after the king’s condition was discovered. When he retired the night before, one of the chamberlains noticed something was amiss and tried to talk to His Majesty. That was when they discovered he had a high fever and was covered in a rash. As of now, he remained unconscious. The palace immediately sent for a court physician, who delivered a chilling diagnosis: the king had the Ashen Nightmare.

This plague had instilled the fear of death in the hearts of many the first time it appeared, and after sixteen years, it was back. Worse yet, the king was infected. The pro-war faction seemed to almost anticipate the news, because as soon as word broke, they immediately detained Maldura’s delegation. It was almost suspicious how well prepared they were. They managed to disarm the Malduran nobles and their bodyguards without coming to blows then promptly confined them.

Why had they done this? Because, as they were just *now* reporting, they had information that the strange illness spreading throughout Maldura was in fact the Ashen Nightmare. The pro-war faction claimed Maldura was targeting Sauslind and trying to spread the disease here. Another noble had also sent word that they’d been diagnosed with the plague as well, but that was only the beginning.

Additional reports had since come in from the capital of other people who had caught the disease.

After sixteen years, the Ashen Nightmare was again resurfacing to devastate not only Sauslind but the entire Ars Continent.

“Prince Christopher! Do you even understand how grave this is?!”

His spit came flying at me despite how much distance separated us, and I drew my brows in displeasure. Personally, I found his blustering annoying. My mother, who sat beside me, seemed to have a different impression. Although she had taken the helm in my father’s place since he was unconscious, the criticism I was facing concerned her.

There’s no point in worrying, I thought, inwardly sighing to myself.

“His Majesty wasn’t infected by the Malduran delegation,” I said.

Surprised murmurs erupted in the room.

“What are you saying?!” bellowed one of the pro-war faction members.

I shot a glare at the man and silenced him, then I turned my gaze to another, prompting them to speak. “Court Physician Harvey, it seems there are still many here ignorant of how the Ashen Plague is transmitted. Please enlighten them.”

The old, gray-haired doctor spoke more gravely than he usually did. “The Ashen Nightmare’s symptoms don’t appear within a mere two- to three-day period. At first, it starts off as a normal cold before taking a sudden turn for the worst. The time it takes for the normal, cold-like symptoms to transition into the Ashen Nightmare differs from person to person. However, even if the incubation period were only one or two days, it would still take several days more for the rash to develop and the person affected to go into a coma.” After speaking those heavy words, he paused briefly to sigh, expression still grim. “His Majesty has been ill for the past ten days or so. We were deeply concerned about it, but conditions being what they were, there wasn’t much we could do.”

In other words, since Maldura’s delegation was already set to enter Sauslind, our border regions and subsequently our neighboring countries were restless. His Majesty was too preoccupied dealing with those matters to be able to adequately rest.

Hearing all of this was so vexing, but I couldn’t let it show, so I discreetly bit my lip instead. If this had happened within the inner palace, where my mother was in charge, information on my father’s condition wouldn’t have spread so rapidly and the situation wouldn’t have deteriorated as it had. Alas, nothing could be done about that now.

Doctor Harvey proceeded to talk about cold symptoms, warning those in power not to hold biases or mistaken beliefs about how the

Ashen Nightmare is transferred from person to person.

“The Ashen Nightmare’s initial symptoms resemble a cold that simply won’t go away. Before the infected person realizes what is happening, the red rash covering their body will begin to change color. Their skin becomes pallid and ashen. It takes about ten to twelve days after the initial symptoms for this to begin, based on the cases we’ve seen up until now.”

Again, an uproar broke out. Maldura’s delegation had only entered the country a mere six days ago. They didn’t make it to the capital to meet with His Majesty until four days thereafter. The timeline for them to infect the king didn’t add up.

Consensus in the room suddenly changed as the other nobles began to criticize the pro-war faction, blaming them for the situation instead.

“In that case, the military’s claim that the Malduran delegation came here to infect the king and declare war on us is entirely unsubstantiated. Worse, their recklessness has brought tension to our borders. Apprehending the delegation only gives Maldura an excuse to make a move on us. How does the military intend to take responsibility for this?” Earl Casull pressed the opposition for answers, his voice solemn and dignified. His house was one of those most loyal to the royal family, putting him in direct opposition to the pro-war faction, which was originally established by Queen Amalia.

“But!” one of the pro-war members began to fiercely protest.

Their faction supported Prince Theodore, the current king’s younger brother (and my uncle). No doubt they viewed Maldura’s arrival as a golden opportunity. After Queen Amalia died, their faction lost the cohesive power that had held them together. Nonetheless, they opposed me for my lack of interest in using the military to subjugate our enemies and instead wanted to install Theodore as their puppet king. They thought they could blame Maldura’s delegation for the spread of the plague and thereby insist the royal faction and I take responsibility for welcoming them here. That would give them the opportunity to wrest the title of crown prince from me and bestow it on my uncle instead. Then they could use that as an excuse to start a war with Maldura, beat them, and proclaim Theodore a hero of the people.

That’s my guess, anyway.

Unfortunately for them, my uncle had left the capital at the same time as Elianna, under secret orders from the king. It was a bit exasperating to think they’d rushed headlong into this when the man they were supporting wasn’t even present. I sighed inwardly at whoever was responsible for pulling the strings here.

The voices of the pro-war members boomed throughout the room.

“They still entered Sauslind without disclosing the truth about how their country is infested with the plague! Obviously they want to spread it to our lands as well because they’re after our wealth!”

“And,” one of them continued, a hidden barb carried in their voice as they broached a forbidden topic, “if you claim he wasn’t infected by the Maldurans, then...” He turned his gaze toward Her Majesty, wearing a smug, malicious grin that was most unbecoming of a noble. “That means we should perhaps turn our suspicions toward those closest to him.”

The implication, albeit unspoken, was clear: *Because he has someone right beside him who was previously infected by the plague.*

Again, chaos erupted.

“Earl Evan! We should have you charged for slander, making such a remark of Her Majesty!” one of the royal faction members shrieked in protest, but there were few others who joined him. Most remembered the darkness that was the Ashen Nightmare, and having someone who’d once been infected by it represent the country was unsettling for them.

I let out a small sigh. *This is exactly why old codgers like you are such a problem.* I opened my mouth to say as much, but my mother intercepted me.

“True enough. If it wasn’t Maldura’s delegation who infected His Majesty, then...” Her voice trailed off into a profound silence as her auburn eyes quietly scanned the room. Even though she said nothing, her solemn gaze still seemed to admonish those critical of her. After a long pause, she broached the delicate topic. “Perhaps, after being infected myself sixteen years ago, I carried it with me and somehow managed to infect the king. No doubt that is what some of you suspect. Even though I managed to beat the disease and recover, there will still be some of you who feel apprehensive. Will His Majesty also follow the same route and recover from the illness? Or will the Ashen Nightmare take him from us and proceed to ravage our country once more?”

Her presence was so commanding that it demanded the attention of all those in the room, many of whom swallowed audibly, awed by the queen.

She paused, letting her words sink in, acting every part the monarch she was. “Or perhaps a different path exists for us. Right now, Sauslind has three options before it. Is there anyone who disagrees with my assessment?”

Queen Henrietta’s intensity overpowered them all. Whatever protest they had, they could only swallow it back and keep silent.

She surveyed them briefly, ensuring none would oppose her before she said, “If I were to lead you when there is still doubt

amongst you, it would cause unnecessary anxiety not only for you but for the people of Sauslind as well. Thus, I would like to pass the right to lead...”

Everyone’s eyes simultaneously turned to me, just before my mother said my name.

“To Prince Christopher.”

Chapter 2: The Prince's Showdown

The soft kiss of snow on my cheeks made me hesitate. I was in a corner of a garden near the innermost part of the palace. White powder coated the ground, quietly covering the footprints I'd left behind me.

It was early, an hour or so shy of dawn's first light.

I always associated snow with howling winds and the like, so the way it peppered me now without a single sound was a surprise, one I basked in with a clear head. Feeling like a child once again, I walked in circles in the snow, trying to warm myself up. The area was only dimly illuminated, and when I glanced back, I was surprised to see the chaotic imprint of my feet in the snow. It looked as if I'd been training rather than innocently wandering.

My breath came out in puffs of white air that quickly melted into the darkness. The footprints I'd left behind were a visualization of what was to come. I checked my footing and repeated the process over and over. The weight of a sword hung heavy in my hand.

When I sensed his presence, I looked up. This wasn't our first time coming face-to-face like this. We'd squared off against each other numerous times when we were children. He was three years older, but even though I was Sauslind's prince, our abilities and statuses were perfectly suited to one another. Inwardly, I admired his fighting style for being instinctive, or perhaps intuitive, you might say. He could see right through feints and tactics. His sense of smell was like an animal's, allowing him to suss out a person's true nature. His heart was so pure and honest.

Silence stretched between us.

What kind of expression was I making right now? Was it the same one he wore on his face? Or did I have the proper, grave demeanor that a prince should in this situation?

We both quietly exhaled the cool morning air. I didn't bother counting how many breaths it took before I finally managed to speak. The words came out as if they'd long ago been determined, as if my status as prince dictated them.

"You're the one who infected my father."

There were only a limited number of people who could approach the king, and all of them carefully screened before they could get close.

The inner garden, which only the royal family and a select few could enter, filled with tension. The early dawn air seemed to freeze over.

He unsheathed his sword, as if he'd been waiting for this moment.

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The events leading to our confrontation originally started at the meeting with the other senior officials. Despite the nobles' heated argument, Mother took into account what affects her leadership would have and temporarily passed the role to me, Prince Christopher.

As I took my seat in the sovereign's chair, I felt the weight of it sink in. After expelling a quiet breath, I scanned the faces of those present.

Mother had already left the room, and in her wake, the main branch of the royal faction—Duke Odin's faction—were left gritting their teeth in frustration. If Her Majesty had retained the right to lead, it would have given their words more weight. He already knew that I had no intention of pandering to his house. Having me take the lead was an unsavory development as far as they were concerned.

Now that the matter of who was leading them was settled, they resumed their same petty complaints.

"How utterly irresponsible."

The pro-war faction wouldn't be satisfied regardless of what the queen decided. They were the ones who had suggested Her Majesty might be responsible for the king falling ill, but when she actually acknowledged their suspicions and gracefully stepped down, they decided to blame her for passing off her responsibility to someone else. While I inwardly envied them for their simplicity, my thoughts were elsewhere.

"First," I said, quieting the nervous atmosphere that now dominated the room. Even the pro-war faction steeled themselves to await the first words from their crown prince. "Our main priority should be to find a countermeasure for the Ashen Nightmare."

"What ridiculous nonsense!" Unsurprisingly, one of the pro-war faction members immediately protested. This was a prime opportunity to retaliate against our long-standing enemy, Maldura. If we displayed the might and power of our military, we could dissuade neighboring countries from trying to come after us in the future.

A dangerous thought briefly crossed my mind. *Instead of punishing them for their discourtesy toward the crown, I could send them right to the front lines of the battle they so desperately desire.*

I sighed to myself and scrapped the idea. "Yes, you lot seem to think this is a perfect opportunity to put Maldura in its place. I'd like you to remember that the Ashen Nightmare didn't merely devastate

Sauslind in the past; it swept over the entire continent. You're asking us to go to war with a plague-ridden nation that has come seeking our help. Not to mention we recently provided them with aid when a major cold wave hit. I understand we have a complicated history between us, but how do you think our neighboring countries will interpret our actions?"

Those who relied upon military force didn't even bother thinking about the future. Say we did overwhelm Maldura with our armies, showing off our power to the other nations. What impact would that have on the rest of the continent? Yes, things would settle temporarily. They would realize defying us was unwise and keep up their guard with us. If Sauslind wanted to be a military power, then perhaps that was an option. But was that really in the best interest of the people and the nation?

Other countries had done the same in the past. They prioritized their own interests and rapidly expanded their military. Where had that led them? The answer was quite clear. One needn't look any further than the fallen empire's history or even Sauslind's own to see where that would take us.

"However!" The pro-war faction wasn't deterred by my rebuttal, remaining as self-assured as ever. "Do you really intend to fret over the opinions of our neighbors and let such a rare opportunity pass?" The man speaking on their group's behalf was adamant that war should take precedence over dealing with the Ashen Nightmare. He tried to mask his sneering, but it was ineffective. In a low but audible voice, he mumbled, "But what can I expect from such a squeamish prince?"

"Heh." My lips pulled into a catlike grin. Apparently, he was too ignorant to realize that such malicious rumors always made their way back to the person at the center of them.

Now, how shall I eviscerate you?

I glanced around at the prominent nobles gathered. Beside me was the person in charge of keeping the meeting in order—Sauslind's prime minister. He was rather low-profile and wore a permanent grimace as if battling a stomachache. It was his duty to calmly consider the opinions of the royal faction and the pro-war faction while maintaining a position of neutrality.

This was part of Sauslind's law, decided long ago during the age of the Hero King. The prime minister was supposed to work beside the king, playing a pivotal role in politics, and no one close in relation to the royal family could be selected for the post. This was to maintain balance. Historically, a royal family's monopoly on positions of power had caused internal conflict, and this was intended to prevent that.

Elianna's older brother, Alfred, had been a stronger contender to

succeed the position, but due to our engagement, neither he nor their father qualified anymore. Said two were also attending this meeting, with the same unreadable expressions they always had. Since my betrothed was from House Bernstein, it was only natural they would be part of the royal faction and support me as prince, right?

Alas, that wasn't the case. Since taking up important government positions four years ago, they had remained faithful members of the neutral faction. Not only did they not join the royal faction, they also never once showed public support for me. Though, frankly, the best aid they could give was to keep quiet at this point.

I drummed my fingers against my knee several times before finally blurting out, "War, war, war. That's all you people talk about." As much as I tried to suppress my anger, there was a chill in my gaze as I stared them down. "But right now, our country is in no position to go into battle."

"What?!" they scoffed.

"Don't speak such absurdities. Sauslind has had abundant harvests since the year before last, and our stockpiles are overflowing. There is more than enough for us to feed and equip our soldiers!"

"Well said," another added with a mocking laugh. "Clearly our prince is too inexperienced to understand our circumstances."

"Perhaps it's too soon for him to sit in the king's chair."

In response, the royal faction erupted. "That's blasphemy!"

You're all impossible, I thought, trying to suppress the irritation boiling up from the pit of my stomach. We were pressed for time. The Ashen Nightmare was slowly sapping away the life force of all those affected, my father included.

I sighed, tamping down my impatience. My words came out calm and composed. "This winter," I began, voice low and rumbling as I quietly surveyed the room, "Sauslind has seen a lot of snow."

There were noticeable intervals of clear weather leading up to the Holy Night's Banquet, at least during the day. The snowfall at night, however, was gradually beginning to have an effect. Regional lords were busy trying to adapt. They had sent us missives indicating it would be difficult to send their men under the current circumstances. Sauslind was bogged down by the unpredictable: immense snowfall and the outbreak of the plague. As for the manpower that would be necessary for a war...

"The way Sauslind is now, we can't afford to send soldiers into combat. The regional lords have their hands full trying to rule their own territories. As for the stockpiles you mentioned, those are being used to alleviate the strain this is having on the people. Now that the Ashen Nightmare has broken out as well, we're in a state of emergency. Our first priority should be to find a way to counter the

disease.” I glanced around, waiting to see if any protested.

The pro-war faction shrank back, their momentum weakened. If there were no soldiers, there was no war. The greater than average snowfall was affecting all of Sauslind. Even if our territories wanted to send troops, they had to deal with their own issues first. The adverse weather would also delay the delivery of supplies, which was why they were digging into their stockpiles to feed people. They had no extra soldiers to send us. Considering how the Ashen Nightmare might spread to their areas in the coming weeks and months, there was a real possibility they might not be able to supply us any of their reserves. If that were to happen, war would be even more out of the question.

A bitter voice protested, “Yes, but does that mean you intend to abandon the Edea Domain then?”

I raised my brow at him.

At the same time, one of the royal faction members tried to interject, only for a loud bang to reverberate throughout the room. In the middle of the military members was the silent General Eisenach. His closed fist sat upon the top of the table, more as a way to silence everyone than intimidate them. Most knew him as a jovial, lighthearted man, but even he was losing his temper at this constant bickering.

“Could we move along and actually discuss what actions we’re going to take already?” barked the general. “Temporary leader though he may be, the prince is still a member of the royal family and your criticisms go too far. Many of you seem more obsessed with opposing him for the sake of it rather than conceding any of his points.”

At last, the pro-war faction seemed to do some self-reflecting and fell silent.

The prime minister cleared his throat, bringing the room back into order. He would be the one to make the final decision on my proposal, so it was time to move into concrete details about what we should do.

First, I discussed the treatment the Pharmacy Lab had devised, which had yet to be clinically tested. We needed to get information on its progress as quickly as possible, confirm how many infected we were dealing with inside and outside the capital, and set up treatment facilities. We also needed to spread education about the sickness, so confusion and rumors didn’t mislead people into hiding away or harming those infected.

At the end, the prime minister added, “Until the situation is contained, we will keep the Maldura delegation in our custody. I hope you can understand my reasoning, Your Highness. Are these terms acceptable?”

I sighed. This was where I was going to have to compromise.

The Ashen Nightmare was spreading throughout Maldura, and their delegation's visit *did* coincide with the king falling ill with the same disease. Those were inescapable facts. If this information got out to the public, it could put the delegation in danger. Perhaps it was safer for them to be locked away in the depths of the palace where the hands of the common people couldn't reach them. Plus, until the military backed down, our borders would remain in a deadlock. Our only common ground at this point was agreeing not to launch an all out war.

I conceded to the prime minister's terms. As talks continued, I looked around the room and recalled how anxious Eli had been at the end of last year. She mentioned not having the confidence to rule the inner palace as my mother did, but to my bitter chagrin, I could empathize all too well.

While I could deal with the royal faction and the pro-war faction on an individual basis, they still looked down on me. It was impossible for me to sway them when they were grouped together like this. I wondered how much time and experience it would take before I could dominate the room like my father. Right now, he was unconscious, his life on the line.

Doubt sprouted in my heart like an unwelcome weed. I tried to nip it in the bud by turning all my focus to the country's issues.

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I grew so busy dealing with domestic matters and making arrangements that several days passed in the blink of an eye.

The number of Ashen Nightmare cases was gradually increasing. We were getting reports of people infected not only in the capital but in neighboring regions as well. Among the citizens, voices of doubt and anxiety were only growing louder.

There were so many matters for me to address and deal with. It was like a mountain of paperwork that never decreased regardless of how hard I worked. Right now, however, there was a more pressing matter than the capital's problems.

Someone close to me was leaking information, and they were also responsible for infecting my father.

The ginger-haired imperial knight, Glen Eisenach, was three years older than me, and we'd been friends since childhood. His normally warm, welcoming expression was nowhere to be found now. The only time his demeanor ever changed this drastically was when someone was targeting my life.

His face and movements were strained with tension as he pulled back, allowing me to face the person behind him—the one I'd just accused of infecting my father.

“Chris...” The culprit’s breath came out in a puff of white, his eyes peeled back in surprise. He knew what was going on; I’d called only him here and blocked off the area so no one could interrupt.

Swathed in black knight’s clothing, Ian Brennan almost faded into the darkness. Even his sun-kissed hair was bathed in shadows. His gentle expression had contorted in shock for a moment, but he soon chuckled, sensing by the atmosphere that no excuses could wriggle him out of this.

“How did you know?”

It was just like him to respond that way. All the tension in my face melted away, expression returning to normal with all the ease of a simple exhale.

“Intuition,” I said, “that’s all.”

He laughed again. His smile was as soft as the freshly fallen snow. “Come on. I know you’re not one to reach a conclusion like that without conducting an exhaustive investigation. You found some kind of proof identifying me as the culprit, didn’t you? Tch, I’m a fool. What am I thinking, outing myself like this?”

He was as cheerful as ever. His disarming, carefree voice was the same now as it was when we first met.

“Ah, well.” Ian smiled, despite the circumstances, his eyes conveying that he’d already accepted the situation. “Chris, you are Sauslind’s prince. I recognized that from the first moment I met you. You’re the one true ruler.” He slid his sword from its sheath, its sharp edge standing out starkly in the darkness.



Only those of the palace guard, imperial guard, or the Black Wing Knights were allowed to carry weapons in the palace.

I sucked in a breath. All of the emotions I had been suppressing were threatening to bubble up. A part of me wondered if we couldn't reverse all of this. Wasn't there some other way? But this man was a serious criminal who had infected Sauslind's king. None of Ian's excuses, whatever they were, would absolve him of that sin. Death was all that awaited him. He'd committed this atrocity knowing full well what the consequences would be. Even now, he wasn't trying to lie his way out or bargain with me. He'd drawn his sword, a sign that he accepted his guilt.

As conflicting emotions continued to swirl within me, I caught a glimpse of something in the dim light surrounding us. When Ian pulled out his sword, it created a small gap in his sleeve, exposing his red, rash-covered skin. That symptom hadn't been present when he first arrived at the capital.

He has the Ashen Nightmare. That's how he infected the king.

From the moment he committed that grave sin, he was prepared for me to judge him. The silent way he stared back at me conveyed as much, as if he was rubbing my shortcomings in my face.

"You are this country's prince."

If what he wanted was not the young man I was when he first met me, but the crown prince of this country, then the only thing I could do was honor that request.

Ian's blade gleamed, reflecting the nearby brazier fire.

Glen stood a short distance away alongside his squad's vice commander, Zack. The anxious look on the latter's face was all too obvious, much to my chagrin. In our bout not too long ago, I had failed to read all of Ian's moves and lost. This time was a battle to the death. Perhaps it was only natural for Zack to feel uneasy.

In spite of the situation, the smile never left Ian's face. He already knew. My skill with the blade wasn't entirely because of drills.

"Chris." His voice was the same now as it had been when we were younger—soft and yet still firm with unwavering resolve. "It's not like I'm just throwing my life away or I got sick of living. There's something I believe in very strongly. So I'm not going down without a fight."

In a flash, he came lunging. I parried the attack, sparks flying as metal clashed with metal. Now that he was closer, I took another glance at his eyes, and the last of my hesitation dissipated. I threw away the sheath I'd been holding in my opposite hand and deflected his next swing. Using the momentum from that, I slid back, putting distance between us. The two of us moved simultaneously, charging at

one another.

Blade bit into flesh with a viscous echo, followed by the brief but audible splatter of liquid hitting the freshly fallen snow. Alas, the darkness couldn't hide the pungent scent of blood. The victor was decided by one most important difference: while I swang with the intent to kill, Ian hesitated to do the same.

When he said he "wasn't going down without a fight," there was a possibility he meant he hoped to escape this situation and plot his next move. On the other hand, perhaps he was indicating his despair and resignation.

I let out a quiet breath and glanced back at the life I had just taken. As I approached him, snow crunched under my boots. It was as if I was retracing my steps, trying to navigate my way out of this nightmare I had wandered into, to escape the numbness of my thoughts. The resistance I felt when I cut him down still lingered in my hands, and reality wasn't kind enough to let me turn away from that fact.

I slid to my knees beside my fallen friend, a puddle of bright crimson spreading out beneath him. He was gasping for breath, but even though his life was slipping away, his gaze remained as kind as ever.

"Ian, who set you up?"

His voice came out like the whistle of wind slipping through a cracked door. There were no words, only a shuddering as he summoned up the last of his strength one final time. Gradually, the light faded from him, and his breathing stilled. Time froze as a silent pause stretched on, until at last his eyelids shut for the last time. Never again would I see those gentle eyes.

As soon as I lifted myself back to my feet, my Shadows (bodyguards) slipped in to cover Ian's body and carry him off, erasing any traces that might have otherwise remained. And as dawn broke and light came peeking over the horizon, the spot where Ian had fallen was clear—as if nothing had ever been there at all.

I stood there in the frigid morning air, sensing someone's approach from behind.

"Here," said Glen in a light, airy voice as he held my sheath out toward me. "If you keep standing there in a daze with your sword drawn, people are going to start asking questions. Hurry and put it up."

I stared down at my sheath, empty of all emotion.

That's right. I threw it away during the battle.

Without warning, said sheath suddenly came swinging up through the air right toward my face. The thought of dodging it didn't even cross my mind. Later, I would wonder what the devil was wrong with

me.

Thwack!

There was a dull echo as lights exploded in the back of my eyes.

Panicked, Glen said, “S-Sorry! I mean, I was sure you were going to dodge that! It’s just...it felt like my only chance to—no, that’s not right. I’m sorry. Seriously, I mean it.”

I pressed a hand to my forehead as sharp pain shot through it. My lips twitched, rising in a maniacal grin.

You have some guts to come straight at me like that. I remember something Eli mentioned to me about a book she read. Something about how men living in palaces abroad—eunuchs, I think she called them—had a certain lower part removed before they served the royal family. Perhaps I should do the same to you.

“Chris! My apology is sincere, I swear. I’m sorry! So please stop looking at me like that. You’re giving me goosebumps!”

I sighed in annoyance at his frantic pleading and snatched the sheath away from him. As I slid my sword back inside, I caught a brief glimpse at my own reflection and narrowly dodged a hand that had been coming toward my head.

“What are you trying to pull?” I snapped.

Glen’s hand froze mid-air. Most likely he was intending to pat me on the head. “Oh, nothing.” He had the same cheery expression on his face as always. “Just figured since you’re younger than me, I could stand to dote on you occasionally.”

I wrinkled my nose in disgust, upper lip peeling back.

“What happened to your reputation as the handsome prince?”

Glen gave a half-hearted smile.

He followed my gaze as I turned my eyes up at the late morning sun. I took the opportunity to slip in behind him, as if hiding in his shadow. For a moment, he froze, but I flipped around and leaned my back against his. A deep, throaty sigh left my lips.

I’d made my judgment based on unshakeable facts and the results of our investigation. We were in a stalemate with Maldura. Unease spread throughout Sauslind as the number of infected grew. To make matters worse, the king was sick and unconscious. We couldn’t let it slip that a man from the Black Wing Knights, led by the country’s war hero, was a traitor. Thus, I decided to resolve it by myself. Maybe if I had addressed the matter publicly, I could have uncovered the person pulling the strings behind all of this, but I couldn’t bring myself to do that.

I had no idea if the choice I made was the right one. Doubts popped up in my head repeatedly. But whatever the answer, my decision was made and there was no turning back.

Before I could call Glen’s name, he blurted out, “Chris, I swear I

will never betray you.” His voice was loud and firm with resolve, as if he were making the declaration directly to the sun. “Even if there comes a day when I have to turn my blade on my family, I swear I will never, ever turn it on you.”

There was a strength and warmth in his back as it supported me. It wasn’t the soft kindness I had received from Ian, but it was the only thing I had left now.

After a brief silence, I finally said, “Glen...” His back twitched, showing he was listening. “You’re making me nauseous.”

“What?!”

I chuckled and slid my sword the rest of the way into its sheath. There was still much I had yet to do. I passed the sword over to Glen and, with renewed determination, started my way back toward the palace.

“Your Highness!”

Zack had left briefly earlier to help with the disposal of Ian’s body, but now he returned with another soldier in tow. The latter had an insignia on him that indicated he was an express messenger.

All the hair on my body stood on end in that moment. My stomach sank, as if predicting the worst.

The messenger took a knee and gave me an overview of the correspondence he carried with him. It was an emergency missive from Alexei Strasser in the Ralshen Region. “General Theoden Bakula of the Black Wing Knights was killed by an unknown assailant,” he began.

Behind me, Glen trembled in fear. His reaction made me even more uneasy, but the shock didn’t stop there.

The messenger took a loud, heavy gulp as if swallowing lead before he continued, “Your betrothed...Lady Elianna Bernstein is...”

Missing.

Chapter 3: The Lady Saint and the Hero King

As senior officials gathered together in the early morning, the death of General Bakula loomed over them. The room froze with fear, and silence reigned. Just a generation ago, the general's overwhelming power had brought victory to Sauslind. He was a hero, their protector. In recent meetings, the pro-war faction was always the first to launch into arguments, but in the wake of Bakula's death, they were all quiet.

Prince Christopher's cold voice boomed throughout the room. "We will keep the news about General Bakula under wraps until the situation here has calmed down."

Murmurs rippled around him.

"But, Your Highness!" The pro-war faction immediately protested.

Chris cut them off with a glare. "Fear and anxiety are spreading among the people. We're not only dealing with the plague but a possible war as well. We cannot afford to cause more unrest by telling them our country's hero is dead. Especially when his death was reported by an unknown witness."

The prince had a point, and the pro-war faction didn't try to argue with him any further. Losing Bakula was a huge blow to their faction when their entire objective was to push for conflict with Maldura.

"Grima Bowen," Chris called to a man in his mid-forties. He was the commander of the Black Wing Knights who were left behind in the capital after General Bakula split their forces. Chris's voice was eerily emotionless as he appointed Grima to take Bakula's place and charged him with investigating the general's attackers. It made a chill run down my spine.

I, Glen Eisenach, was stationed in a corner of the room, quietly spectating. There was a lump in my chest—a "bad feeling," if you will. Although I regularly accompanied the prince as his bodyguard, weapons were banned from meetings between top officials, and since I had my sword with me at all times, I wasn't allowed in. My father was an exception; he was general of the imperial guard and had His Majesty's express approval. Despite the rules normally prohibiting it, there were three of us from the prince's personal guard attending this meeting. Our presence here was proof the royal family was in danger.

The king wasn't the only one who had fallen ill; his elder sister, Duchess Strasser, was bedridden due to the Ashen Nightmare as well.

Two members of the royal family had contracted the plague in succession. Calling this an emergency situation was an understatement.

As my childhood friend coolly debated with the other high-ranking nobles, an anxiety the likes of which I had never experienced before welled up inside me. Up until this point, no matter how far he was backed into a corner, Chris always maintained his composure. It was clear to me now that he'd never panicked because he always had a stable support system to lean back on.

Even if Chris was a bit reckless at times, his father always had his back. When his policies provoked dissatisfaction with the conservative faction, he remained undaunted. Besides his father, he normally had two others at his side as well: Lady Elianna, his betrothed, who had built up a reputation for herself among the people, and Alexei, who flawlessly laid the groundwork for the prince's endeavors in advance.

It was their mental support that was most important, however. No matter how tough the obstacle Chris faced, he was never truly without options. That was why he could overcome it all with such poise. The person he wanted to protect the most was at his side, hence him being so daring and self-assured.

I almost held my breath as debate sparked among the officials about the prince's betrothed.

"Are we sure she hasn't simply run away?"

When news that Elianna was missing came up, the first to speak (to no one's great surprise) was Earl Brandt of Duke Odin's faction. Voices of shock and protest immediately broke out, but some chimed in with their agreement. All of the latter were from the duke's faction.

"Seems plausible to me. She claimed she was going to settle the unrest among the people, but perhaps that was just lip service. Odds are she's already fled. Either way, she was a Bibliophile Princess who knew nothing outside the world of books. I'm sure the reality of the plague and those infected by it caused her to run due to fear. It seems a perfectly believable explanation to me."

There were few who opposed their criticism and derision. Most who supported Chris and Lady Elianna's union were mid-ranking nobility, young civil officials, and (most prominently) the citizenry. Those at the top of the social ladder were more conservative and aligned with Duke Odin's stance.

Moreover...

"You have a point. The prince's betrothed was the one who originally advocated for peace with Maldura. Yet inviting them here only caused the Ashen Nightmare to spread. She likely got scared she would be held responsible for that and took off."

Unsurprisingly, the pro-war faction joined in with their own

unsubtle ridicule. The man who spoke turned a pointed look at the neutral faction, where Lady Elianna's father sat silently. Their whole greasy group concurred in pushing the blame off on the prince's absent fiancée.

"It does make one question the girl's nature. This is a grave predicament, is it not?"

They spoke as if they'd already confirmed that Lady Elianna was dodging her responsibilities. And unfortunately, in a rare move, the chief members of the pro-war faction and royal faction were all too happy to agree on this point. Marquess Bernstein had reduced the military in the past couple of years, and both factions saw this as an opportunity to get rid of him and his daughter—particularly because they'd had numerous disagreements with Lady Elianna as well.

"Ah yes, I heard there's someone else whose reputation is growing in the capital as of late," said one noble, intentionally changing the subject. It was hard to believe these men were having such a discussion when their future crown princess was missing.

"That's right," agreed another with a calculating grin.

Pain shot through my fist as I clenched it.

This is hardly the time to be bringing up such nonsense!

Earl Brandt proudly launched into an explanation for the rest of those present. "The outbreak of the Ashen Nightmare is spreading apprehension among the common folk. People seeking some way to protect themselves are crowding around the capital's free treatment facility. Fortunately, the pomelo fruit is widely known to be effective in preventing the disease. In the past sixteen years, the Diana company has dried and stored pomelo fruit. The duke's daughter, Lady Pharmia, has been handing it out to the poor and their children. Many are now calling her the 'Lady Saint.' It's no exaggeration to call her Sauslind's savior!"

People brightened, showering the lady with praise. I managed to bite back the words of protest hanging on the tip of my tongue, gritting my teeth in frustration.

This is absolutely ridiculous!

Considering Lady Elianna's personality and past accomplishments, there was no doubt in my mind she truly did intend to quell the uprising in the Ralshen Region. She was also the one who'd remained steadfast in supporting efforts to research a cure for the plague all these years. It was her idea to construct a free treatment facility and education center for doctors. Ten years ago when she and His Highness first met, she mentioned it to him, and he spent nearly that entire decade laying the groundwork to make it happen. Now Lady Pharmia was receiving all of the praise.

I realize this sounds rude, but she's stealing credit for their work.

Despite the truth, Earl Brandt blithely continued singing praises for the duke and his family. “I realize that Lady Elianna has her fair share of accomplishments as well, but given the situation, what can I say? Perhaps we should rethink who is truly important to Sauslind as things stand right now.”

He was basically suggesting they switch out Lady Elianna for Lady Pharmia. Other people agreed, mumbling, “Well, we certainly can’t have a crown princess who abandons her own country.” They spoke as if they were convinced that Lady Elianna had turned her back on us.

As he sat in the king’s chair, Chris said nothing in response. The atmosphere around him remained the same as it had at the start of the meeting, and that only made my unease grow.

A harsh voice echoed through the room. “Enough of this nonsense.” It was Earl Casull, highly revered as an authority figure within the royal faction. His expression was stiff, voice unforgiving as he stared down his fellow nobles. “The wedding date has already been officially set. Lady Elianna is your future crown princess. In fact, the whole reason she is missing is because she was with General Bakula when they were attacked. Instead of seeing this for what it truly is—an emergency—you would cast suspicion on her? Surely you would not speak ill of decisions our country has already made at this late hour.”

Earl Brandt faltered at that pointed barb.

Earl Casull’s words carried such weight because his house had been loyal to the royal family for generations. Also, the larger factions weren’t a cohesive group. That went for the military as well. Not all of them were with the pro-war faction; my father, the general, was more neutral.

After a short pause, the pro-war faction jumped in to attack Lady Elianna’s failings from a different angle.

“Honestly, if she hadn’t stuck her nose where it didn’t belong and insisted on quelling the revolt, we wouldn’t be in this situation. She’s the one who got General Bakula wrapped up in all of that. He’s a victim. How is she going to take responsibility?”

They went on like that, regurgitating the same arguments. I had to hold myself back from sighing loudly. I respected Chris and his father for having the patience to put up with this constantly. I’d be exhausted if I were the one dealing with it, and I’d probably put in a request to serve in the countryside instead.

Alas...

I stared at Chris. There was nowhere for him to run, unlike me. I swore long ago I would fight to provide a space where he could rest and be at ease. Yes, a long, long time ago...

“Quiet,” rang a cold, sharp voice.

I blinked a couple of times before realizing it was the prime minister speaking—the man who represented the neutral faction. Despite his unassuming appearance, when he mediated between the other officials, he was very authoritative.

“Earl Casull has a valid point. We’ve already recognized Lady Elianna as our future crown princess. Someone attacked her and her party, and that act is tantamount to treason. We should consider this an emergency, the same as we did with General Bakula’s passing.”

The three factions present were puzzled about how to interpret his statements. At face value, he was insisting they remain loyal to the decisions they had already made. But he also spoke of the attack in the past tense, as if he was already considering what step they should take next. He was showing favoritism to neither side.

Bitter as I was to admit it, I respected his ability. I could see why he’d been selected as the prime minister.

As Chris began giving out his orders, the bad feeling that had been twisting in my gut suddenly tightened. “In regards to the free treatment facility in the capital, we created that for the people. What anyone else does there, so long as it doesn’t interfere with the original purpose of the facility, I won’t interfere.”

A shock ran through me. That facility was something he and Lady Elianna had built together. By saying that, he was practically acknowledging Lady Pharmia’s actions as just. He was certainly showing impartiality as a politician, but it was so...unlike him. Up until now, he always lost himself to his emotions when it came to anything regarding Lady Elianna. I almost didn’t recognize him.

The difference was just as palpable to the others in the room. While some were dumbfounded by the change, others eyed the prince as if scrutinizing him.

My fists tensed, and suddenly, a memory came rushing back to me. Perhaps Ian’s words before he died had been a curse—a spell to bind His Highness.

“Chris, you are this country’s prince.”

The two had been friends once, and that one line was all Ian left behind before Chris killed him. Now those words seemed to be haunting him, forcing him to change. Almost like he was inwardly chastising himself to prioritize the lives of his people over his obsession with Lady Elianna.

My hands remained clenched for the rest of the meeting.

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I heard my name being called and turned to find a ten-year-old boy staring up at me, eyes glowing and cheeks flushed red. His lips spread in a grin as he spoke, words slightly accented. “Thanks to you,

my whole family can travel in peace. Thank you so much, Lady Saint!"

The boy's clothes were covered in dirt, his skin a deep tan. His social rank was obviously low, but I beamed at him and kneeled nonetheless, stretching a hand toward the mop of unkempt hair on his head. The others around me knit their brows in disapproval, but I responded in the same soft and kind voice I used with everyone else.

"May the Goddess Saoura watch over you and your family," I said, using the name of the Sauslind's goddess of love and healing.

As if by instinct, he responded with words from his own religion. "And may the Roma's stars guide your path, Lady Saint." It was a traditional saying the Roma used among themselves as they traveled the Ars Continent.

After parting ways with the child, I took some time to respond to others who called out to me, and once finished, climbed into my carriage to head for the next location. Ever since the capital announced the new outbreak of the Ashen Nightmare, people were clamoring for medicine and salvation. They came from all over the country, traveling here in droves, as I suspected they would.

"But there's fewer people than I thought there would be..." I mumbled.

It wasn't until I was in the safe, confined space of my carriage that I could finally take a breather.

"Lady Pharmia," called one of my female servants. She passed over a wet cloth for me to cleanse myself with. I wiped my hands and skin several times, taking a cup of water to gargle as a preventative measure. These steps had become customary among the nobility since the Ashen Nightmare's original outbreak sixteen years ago. The disease was rampant enough outside that you could catch it without ever realizing. By washing and gargling, we could at least reduce the spread as much as possible.

The drink she next handed me was pomelo juice, which was as valuable as gold right now since it was midwinter. We had made improvements to the beverage to make it more palatable, but the taste still wasn't pleasant. Nonetheless, I reminded myself of its medicinal benefits and drained the cup.

I can't afford to get infected right now.

I used some water to cleanse my mouth.

Nearby, one of my maids frowned. "Circumstances aside, this is absurd. Sauslind's common folk and their children approaching you are one thing, but Roma as well? Do they have no respect for our country's nobility? Plus, you're closely related to the royal family. You're heir to an ancient and honorable bloodline, my lady. I know the situation is dire, but the common folk are far too disrespectful!"

I smiled bitterly as maids surrounded me. Two were wiping down

my hair while another sat in front of me, scrubbing so fiercely at my skin I feared she might peel it right off.

I, Pharmia Odin, had a noble bloodline, a solid education, and a respectable upbringing. If not for the present emergency, I would never show myself to the people, let alone touch them or speak with them. My high status wouldn't permit it. It was only because of our dire circumstances that a noble lady as pampered as me could visit the free treatment center and the poor neighborhoods of the people, extending a hand of salvation. Rumors naturally spread as a result.

The free treatment center, which was established to treat the impoverished, sat at the edge of the capital. It had a modest reputation in the beginning. Thanks to Lady Elianna introducing me to everyone there, no one had any cause to doubt when I naturally assumed command of the place. However, when the Ashen Nightmare broke out again in the capital, I began passing out dried pomelo fruit. That roused their suspicions, and they were now keeping their distance.

I couldn't blame them. Pomelo fruit was only effective against the Ashen Nightmare when squeezed into juice. Dried pomelo did basically nothing, as medical staff discovered during their research these past sixteen years. In spite of information to the contrary, people continued to fixate on the fruit. It had to be imported from abroad since it couldn't be harvested in Sauslind during the winter. Thus, people's attention turned to my family, since we had a trade deal with the main supplier of pomelo. Passing out dried fruit for free had inevitably earned me the name of "Lady Saint."

I hadn't intended to distribute it to the Roma originally. Nobles tended to avoid them, after all. But since they were helping spread my name, I didn't mind.

As I mused over these thoughts to myself, I suddenly recalled the events from yesterday. A friend had suddenly approached me.

"Mia!"

That was a nickname only a select few ever used.

"Is what you're doing truly just?"

Like me, she was closely related to the royal family and grew up a pampered lady, though she was known for her erratic behavior. She would shake off her maid, slip out of her house, and wander the town. At times, she would even barge into my house for a visit without warning. Even her marriage came as a shock from out of nowhere. The rest of us had to struggle to keep up and accommodate her.

Her visit yesterday had been entirely unprompted. She was pregnant and due to give birth at the start of summer, and yet she risked coming to a place teeming with plague just to see me.

"Pharmia," she had repeated when I didn't answer, her mahogany-

colored eyes staring straight at me. "I know you're passing around dried pomelo fruit. Stop."

I smiled faintly, tilting my head. For a moment, a pained expression crossed her face. Almost as if she was the one hurt by my actions.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

Pomelo was the only fruit effective against the Ashen Nightmare. Yes, there was medicine out there to diagnose and slow the disease, but that didn't ease people's fears. It wasn't a cure—it didn't erase the sickness entirely. In which case, what was wrong with me doing something to reduce people's anxiety?

When I said as much, my black-haired friend only shook her head, eyes judging me.

"If they eat that and feel safe, then they're more likely to go outside and spread it or get sick themselves. You're only making them lower their guard. That could make things worse. Pharmia, all of the doctors at the facility tried to stop you, didn't they?"

Ah, so that's why you've come. You're taking her side.

There were people who tried to stop me at first, claiming I was deceiving people. All of the staff carried the same beliefs as Lady Elianna. "Even if the government disapproves, we should be spreading proper information," they said. But on the other hand, none of the royal family had come to me directly to demand I cease my efforts. That was probably why Therese was here.

She continued, "His Highness and the doctors are trying to teach people preventative care, and you're only getting in the way by doing this. If you want to pit yourself against Lady Elianna, there has to be a better—"

"Therese," I said, cutting her off. It was rare for me to do that.

I already knew how other people saw me. They thought of me as a recluse who looked down on other people and laughed at them behind their backs. Yet now here I was standing center stage, with the citizenry lauding me as a saint. No doubt it shocked them, and they probably suspected me of having ulterior motives. To that I would say: so what? There were others out there doing the exact same thing.

"If His Highness disapproves of my actions, he need only make an official proclamation. He could inform the people of Sauslind that the dried fruit has no effect."

"Mia..." Her face fell.

The number of infected was rising, and fear and confusion were beginning to take root all across the country. No official announcement had been made, but there were rumors the king had fallen sick as well. Some blamed Maldura for spreading it. War was on the horizon.

Although uncertainty loomed ahead, the pomelo fruit was the one thing people knew they could rely on because it was effective against the disease. But what would happen if the government revealed that the dried fruit had no benefits? What would happen if we ceased distributing it?

People would fall into despair. Some might start to doubt, thinking the aristocracy was monopolizing the fruit for themselves. That would take all hope away from the people. Revolts would break out. The northern lands were a good example of that. The reason neither the government nor His Highness could censure me was because I wasn't doing anything wrong.

I gazed back at my friend, unyielding. "I'm not going to stop, Therese." Things had already progressed past the point of no return, and I had no intention of ending it here. So I made my intentions clear, reaffirming my own resolve. "Don't come here anymore."

I've chosen my path, and it's not one that will ever intersect with yours again.

Originally, we had walked the same path, before we were ever old enough to realize it. The two of us descended from houses connected to the royal family. Both the common folk and the nobility recognized us for our status and the bright future it would afford us. We were the most powerful because we were the strongest contenders to be wed to the crown prince. There were those who politely dismissed the possibility, saying we were too closely related. But the prince refused an engagement with the archduke's daughter. The strongest candidates left after that—whose blood, house, and upbringing suited the role—were Therese and myself.

I thought we shared a tight bond with the prince, too. We were all close in age, had spent our childhoods together, and shared memories and secrets. Things only changed when *she* appeared.

Most likely, that was when the path Therese and I shared finally split. Once she was no longer a candidate to be Prince Christopher's betrothed, she went off to find her own path. I was the one who decided to stay where I was.

From the time we were young, the two of us shared the same environment. People compared us, and we competed all the time. Sometimes we even comforted one another. She was the only companion I ever had who could truly understand me. And that was why I had to tell her...

"Therese." She was gaping at me still, shocked by my previous response. I wanted to convey my gratitude—for her friendship, and for her coming this far with me. "Thank you for everything, and...farewell."

I wasn't going to turn back. My heart was made up from a young

age. I wanted to stand beside His Highness, to support him, comfort him, and provide a place where he could feel at ease. That was my heart's deepest desire. And this was my last, golden opportunity to fulfill it—a chance to get closer to him than I ever had been before.

So don't get in my way, Therese. This is the only means I have left. I don't care what I have to do to achieve my goal. As long as I can become the only woman in Prince Christopher's life, that's all that matters to me.

As the carriage rolled to a stop, I cut off the memories and climbed out. Before me was the temple where Karl, the Hero King, was enshrined. It was as famous and respected as the palace, and it acted as a symbol for Sauslind. His Highness and the other nobles had authorized it to be repurposed as a hospital for those sick with the Ashen Nightmare.

Other holy places across the country were being transformed into makeshift sick wards as well. It was a marked difference from the way things had been sixteen years ago. Back then, people turned the sick away, and some even resorted to violence. But there was none of that this time. The temple welcomed the infected with open arms.

It made sense that there were fewer flocking to the capital than I had expected; the prince was frantically passing measures to combat the disease. My own actions were likely impeding his efforts.

When I dismounted from my carriage, cries of joy rang out. “The Lady Saint has come!”

Noblemen were too terrified of the plague to leave their houses, let alone allow their daughters outside. Thus, by venturing out here where the infected were and interacting with people, my popularity was booming. There were even rumors that as long as I was around, no one near me would catch it.

I always made my way to the palace after visiting the temple. This was mostly to report on the infected and what I observed of the situation outside, but that wasn't how it looked to the general populace. From their perspective, I was set to become the next crown princess.

With the outbreak of the Ashen Nightmare and whispers of war breaking out, all the hype and excited preparation for the crown prince's wedding had ceased. Likewise, the Bibliophile Princess's acclaim had waned as well.

I was fit to become crown princess. Voices rose in support of me, growing more persuasive by the day. Some even suspected Prince Christopher and I were close enough that I might become pregnant with the heir soon.

The source of these rumors was obvious, but I didn't care if people knew it was me. I had never been the center of attention before, but now I was thrust into the limelight. Lady Elianna was no different.

The only thing that separated the two of us was that Chris chose her and not me. That was it.

Therese's words from before echoed in my head.

"Mia..." Even after I made my declaration and turned away, she had asked me again, in that commanding voice of hers, "Are you truly sure what you're doing is right?"

I walked away without replying.

She continued calling after me, her voice trembling with emotion. "You fool... You absolute fool..."

As the memory faded, I made my way to the inner part of the temple, gazing up at the towering statue of the Hero King. He was said to have only ever loved the Lady of the Lagoon, Ceysheila.

But to leave your bloodline behind, you married other women, too. Do you truly think those people had no place in your heart? All that's left in history is talk of the pure love you shared with the Lady of the Lagoon. But what of the other women who loved you—who wished for your love in return?

I squeezed my hands and bowed low. I didn't need his answer because I had my own.

Pure love isn't everything.

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The Ralshen Region occupied the northeastern part of Sauslind, containing numerous mines across its lands. The highway connecting it to the neighboring Azul Region was always bustling in the winter. This was largely due to a never-ending stream of people commuting from Azul to find work in Ralshen. Foot traffic had dried up these past several days, however. The Ashen Nightmare, which had once haunted Sauslind's lands, was back.

Yet in one of the roadside inns along the highway, laughter boomed. It was a rare sound, especially in light of the lack of people as of late and the morose atmosphere that had settled across the land.

A man was holding a stringed instrument in one hand, his melodious voice ringing through the main room in a way one scarcely heard in the remote countryside. "And that was where the man introduced himself. 'I was born and bred in Saoura's downtown and given my first bath in the waters of the Hero King's temple. They gave me the last name King and the first name Tiger. I'm just a man, but there isn't a wild beast out there that I can't tame. Even a feral princess will be a kitten by the time I'm through.' Thus he introduced himself, and the noble lady went red with anger. With a love whip in hand, she chortled, 'How brazen! Very well, I will just have to teach you some manners!' Thus it begins—the showdown between the animal tamer and the fierce princess. What end awaits the two?!"

He began strumming on his lute as the audience showered him with raucous applause.

“Old man!” called one of the customers after draining the last of his glass.

Grumbling, I refilled his drink. I was the keeper of this humble old inn that doubled as a pub, and I’d sure gotten myself some odd customers lately. Normally, my patrons were mostly miners, laborers, and merchants—not the types to show good etiquette. But I avoided unnecessary fights by not keeping any prostitutes around the place. It was a simple, run-of-the-mill inn that provided people with a place to sleep and eat. That was it.

So why was it so noisy here tonight?

Everyone had been holed up in their houses, quarantining themselves, but now they were crammed in together in a closed space, laughing and making merry.

Business was thriving, so there was nothing for me to sniff at. But that singer fellow... He claimed he was an entertainer, but there was something altogether suspicious about him. He had honey-blond hair and watchful emerald-green eyes. Since he was still on the cusp of adulthood, his appearance was disarmingly boyish and innocent. That fact wasn’t lost on him; he was taking advantage and profiting from it. The boy was handsome and skilled enough to perform at one of the theaters in the capital, yet my instincts told me not to let my guard down around him.

But he wasn’t even the one who intrigued me the most.

My gaze turned toward the back of the inn, where a small figure was slipping out the back door. I left the other staff to handle the refills and chased after them.

“Gene, are you going home?”

They swiveled around to look at me, their chestnut-colored, chin-length hair swaying with the motion. Their eyes were the same color, albeit almond shaped. They rarely spoke, and even their features were the definition of cold and unwelcoming.

I hesitated to let them leave. They were only about twelve or thirteen—too young and fragile to be wandering out into the snow alone. I knew Gene would refuse, but as I always did, I invited them to stay the night.

Gene shook their head.

“I figured as much.” I gave a bitter smile, slipped a hand into my pocket, and pulled out some coins, adding a few more than I usually did. “Added some more in as thanks for helping keep things here under control.”

Gene’s eyes went wide with surprise.

My wife popped out from behind me, forcing a wrapped lunchbox

into Gene's hands, and then the two of us watched them go.

There was a man waiting on a horse to deliver Gene back to their house.

"Be sure to give the witch our regards!" I called after them.

Gene bowed their head in a wordless gesture of thanks, briefly pausing to let their eyes linger on the inn, as if they'd left something behind. They were intrigued by the same person who had caught my attention. Not the young boy who could play in Sauslind's famous theaters, no; it was the person who had stopped the incident here earlier before it escalated into something ghastly—the petite boy dining in a corner of my inn, who looked like an attendant in training.

Chapter 4: The Princess's Test

"In other words..." The man's voice trailed off as he lifted his wine cup in one hand, a mocking gleam in his eyes.

Hersche was a small mining town with a highway running through its center, making it a hub for travelers. Although laughter was booming from one of its inns, this place was only a half a day's ride from Mt. Urma where revolts were taking place.

The man's voice carried its usual teasing tone as he explained himself. "I was hunting some prey and followed its trail here. And what do I find? You, my dear bookworm. I decided to keep an eye on you, figuring something was going on." His slightly wavy hair was the same black color as his eyes, and there was something wild and unrestrained about his demeanor.

His true identity was not something we could publicly reveal. Which made me wonder, why was someone like him even here in Sauslind?

Despite the man's explanation, the person beside me remained tense. Their eyes were ever wary as they pinned him with a glare.

The man's lips peeled back in an amused grin. "You're sending a chill down my spine. And after all I did to save you guys in your hour of need." He spoke airily as his gaze wandered, looking for support. It landed on me, Elianna Bernstein. As chance would have it, I also couldn't reveal my true identity or my gender.

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As we stepped out of the carriage, a strong blast of wind and snow forced me to squint. We were on a mountain path, one leading to the town at the foot of Mt. Urma. If the buildup of snow along the roads here was any indication, the place didn't see much traffic. But despite this, hoofprints were scattered everywhere, and the stench of blood hung thick all around us.

Moments ago, our assailants had cornered our carriage and demanded we step out. With no other recourse, I ventured out into the snow. Lord Alan and Mabel were leading the way, blocking the enemy's view of me.

The armed escorts who accompanied us were nowhere to be seen. Instead, about ten men on horseback surrounded our carriage. The masks on their faces made it impossible to identify them, but it was

obvious what they'd come for.

"You're Elianna Bernstein," remarked a man with a gaze sharp enough to pierce right through me. He had been locked in battle only a few short minutes ago, and like his comrades, he continued to radiate bloodlust. He carried a sword in one hand, coated in thick, red liquid.

I stiffened, fisting both of my hands. That blood belonged to Grandpa Teddy and the other Black Wing Knights who'd been guarding us. Up until we stepped out of the carriage, fear had been pumping through me, leaving my lungs tight and restricted. Yet now an eerie calm settled over me. I placed my hands on the shoulders of the two trying to protect me and stepped past them, putting myself face-to-face with the intimidating man on his horse.

"Yes, I am Elianna Bernstein, the fiancée of Sauslind's crown prince. I know you are here because of me, but I won't allow you to harm me so easily. State now what your master hopes to gain by killing me."

"Hah." His lips quirked beneath the mask as mocking laughter trickled out. "Oh, you're not going to cry and beg for your life? You're going to give orders instead? Gutsy. But I would expect no less from the country's next crown princess." The man sneered at me, his animosity unabating. "But you must not understand the situation you're in. You're just a sheltered, ignorant noble girl. If you're going to die anyway, it won't do you any good to know the truth."

The man whipped his sword through the empty air in an attempt to intimidate us. The way his eyes gleamed made me gulp. Puffs of white colored the air around us as the horses inhaled and exhaled.

Lord Alan and Mabel scrambled toward me, trying to intercept our attacker. But before they could, he spurred his horse forward and lifted his weapon, intending to cut me down without mercy.

A short sword came whizzing out of nowhere, piercing through the man's arm. I let out a shuddering breath, and in the same instant, Mabel stifled a scream. Our assailants whipped their heads around in confusion. More blades came crashing through the air, twinkling as the light caught them. I didn't have the luxury of seeing whether they hit their mark, though, because someone suddenly grabbed me.

"M'lady!"

"Jean," I gasped.

"Hurry, while we have a chance!" Apparently, in the confusion, he'd disconnected the horses from our carriage. But as we made our way toward them, one of our attackers escaped the rain of daggers to block our path.

The atmosphere around Jean shifted instantly as a sword came racing toward us. He reached into his coat pocket, but before he could

do anything, a horse raced past us. The rider cut down our enemy.

Another gust of snow whipped across my face, but I still got a glimpse of our rescuer. His hair was as black as midnight, his body light and agile. His eyes housed a feral gleam, but they didn't survey us as mockingly as they had when we first met; he hadn't the luxury of patronizing us when he was too busy glaring.

"Come, Bibliophile Princess!" He leaned down and wrapped an arm around me, scooping me up.

"Lady Elianna!" Mabel cried.

Jean and Lord Alan shouted after us, but they were no less surprised than our assailants by this development.

"After them!"

The rain of daggers had ended. Our enemies, who had sustained only minor scratches, now turned their bloodlust back toward us.

I peeked over the shoulder of my savior. Someone I assumed to be our ally was facing off our attackers by themselves. Lord Alan managed to wrangle a horse that had lost its rider, scrambling up into the saddle before pulling up Mabel as well. Jean also managed to locate a mount for himself, bringing up the rear. Behind them were three shadows locked in battle with our pursuers.

"Those are..." I mumbled.

"You'll bite your tongue. Keep your mouth shut." That line made him sound more like a kidnapper than my savior.

His body wrapped around mine, blocking out the blizzard surging around us. I peered up into his dark eyes. There was something foreign and mysterious about him.

His lips curled in a mocking grin. "If you get assassinated by some random, bloodthirsty hooligans, my country will take the blame. It'll trigger all out war. I'd like to avoid that, Bibliophile Princess."

He was Maldura's prince, Irvin Orlanza.

We took remote, narrow paths as we weaved our way through the mountains, trying to throw off any pursuers. Even as the minutes turned into hours, we didn't stop. Not until even I, as a novice, was sure they'd lost our trail. The sun had already ducked over the horizon by that point, and the chill of night began to envelop us.

There were six of us spread out on four horses. Prince Irvin and I took the lead, checking the road ahead. Lord Alan rode beside us, occasionally helping navigate. Mabel sat behind him, her concern for me unwavering. At our heels was Prince Irvin's servant, who was intent on protecting his master's back. Jean acted as our rearguard.

We were all on edge, anxious to put some distance between ourselves and our pursuers. No one spoke more than a few words as we wound our way through the wilderness. Right as apprehension,

exhaustion, and the chilly night air were starting to take a serious toll, Prince Irvin guided us to a tiny village. The people there were openly wary of us, but after negotiating with them, Prince Irvin managed to secure a room for Mabel and myself. The boys spent the night in a barn.

There wasn't any time for me to ask Prince Irvin questions, and moreover, I didn't even have the strength to speak. I sank onto the bed beside Mabel, heavy with exhaustion, and fell deep into sleep.

The next morning, Mabel woke well before me and cobbled together some clothes to help disguise me. For some reason, she was dressing me up as a male attendant-in-training. She put my hair in braids and neatly gathered them on top of my head, wrapping a cloth around my scalp. The style resembled something I had read about in foreign books, but the concept wasn't altogether foreign since the region was cold and people often covered their heads here. Although its main purpose was to serve as a disguise, I welcomed the warmth it provided.

Once finished, Mabel briefly explained that I needed to hide my identity since I was being targeted. General Bakula had mentioned it as well, but someone was leaking my information. So long as the culprit was still at large, we would need to keep up this charade, especially since we were still in unsafe territory.

I could hardly refuse when they were the ones protecting and looking after me. And so, I nodded. Mabel would continue to dress as a woman, and I would play the role of El, her male apprentice. Part of the reason she wasn't disguising herself was because her feminine figure was more conspicuous than my own.

She's also probably preparing herself for the worst case scenario—intending to take my place should our pursuers catch up with us.

I clenched my fists.

By the time the late winter sun began its ascent, we were back on the road. I was riding with Prince Irvin today as well.

As the snow crunched beneath our horse's feet, I peered over my shoulder at him. "Um..." It was about time to start asking my questions.

Prince Irvin was tearing out bites from a clump of hard bread. Despite how dry it was, he had no issues swallowing it down before he spoke. "This is no time to worry about how ill-mannered it is to eat on horseback. Just accept it. Consider it a chance to experience something new."

"Okay..." As I glanced between the chunk of bread and the hard block of cheese he handed me, I remembered I hadn't eaten since breakfast the day before. I took small bites as my body rocked back and forth atop the horse—an experience I'd certainly never had

before.

Lord Alan rode beside us, Mabel sitting behind him once again. She glanced over at me and said, “Lady Elianna, I’m afraid water is the only drink we have, but would you like some?”

I wanted to politely turn her down, but I was too busy struggling to swallow down the dry bread.

Prince Irvin’s tone was light as he replied, “You’ll rouse suspicion if you talk to *him* that politely, and you’d better not use *his* real name when we’re in town.”

Mabel glared at him, lips thinning. Lord Alan had already explained to her Prince Irvin’s true identity, and that he wasn’t an enemy (at least for the moment). She was only more suspicious once she knew he was a Malduran Prince.

When we were first deciding who would ride with whom, Mabel had protested, claiming I should be riding alongside my manservant or Lord Alan. Jean and Prince Irvin’s servant disagreed, insisting it would be easier to protect the two of us if we were together. They had a point; it would cause an international scandal if something were to happen to either of us. Especially since Prince Irvin was a Malduran prince and we were already in a politically precarious situation in Sauslind.

Speaking of which...

I started gulping down chunks of bread, trying to hurry through breakfast so I could finally get to the question I’d been wanting to ask.

Mabel quipped, “I fully intend to be careful around other people, but I appreciate the input of our ‘foreign bodyguard-for-hire.’” She put special emphasis on those last few words, taking a dig at Prince Irvin’s disguise.

Despite not being able to see his reaction since he was sitting immediately behind me, I could still sense his amusement.

Before the two could trade barbs any further, a voice cut in. “Enough with the quibbling. I’d thank you both to finish your food quickly. Once we get onto the highway, we’ll be speeding up.” Rei, Prince Irvin’s servant, also had his hair wrapped in fabric and hidden away. The way he spoke was firm and uncompromising, as if he wouldn’t forgive a delay in our schedule.

Like Prince Irvin, Rei was in his early twenties. For a man, he had beautiful features and a slender figure, but the hideous number of freckles scattered across his face ruined his otherwise captivating appearance. Even the villager who’d lent their room to us pitied Rei so much they went out of their way to suggest a local tonic.

Rei had looked genuinely guilty after the exchange, mumbling to himself, “I never imagined anyone would take my disguise that seriously.”

Lord Alan chuckled, bringing my attention back to the current conversation. "I guess even Maldura has people like Alex."

Another voice chimed in from behind, heavy with sorrow. "This is the first time in a while since servin' the young miss that I've had to eat something so boring and bland. The last time I ate like this was to clear out my stomach after eating that concoction the miss and her older brother made."

As the sky began to darken after a long day's journey, we at last arrived at our original destination, a small hub town near Mt. Urma called Hersche.

I wanted to make haste and stop the revolts where they were happening as quickly as possible so we could redirect our efforts to looking after the infected. At the same time, I wondered what happened to Grandpa Teddy, the Black Wing Knights, and the others we left behind in the second carriage.

There was so much weighing on my mind. Yet at the moment, all I could do was hide my true identity. To make matters worse, I had neither medicine nor supplies, and there were no doctors knowledgeable about illness alongside me. There was a limit to what we could do even if we did make our way to where the revolts were taking place. Although I was sheltered and ignorant of the world, I wasn't so naive as to believe my title as the prince's betrothed would be enough to bring relief to the people.

When the Ashen Nightmare spread before, it brought with it an abundance of misinformation that still remained deeply entrenched. It was even worse when coupled with people's baseless prejudices. If that wasn't abundantly clear to me already, it soon would be.

When we reached the inn, a sense of relief hit me. We at least had a roof over our heads. The main room was comparatively warm, accompanied by the inviting scent of fresh food. It was a bit cramped inside, but the rooms were neatly maintained and the beds were clean. It was also reassuring to see how normal life was for the residents and merchants here, despite how gloomy and anxious the outside world was.

Exhausted from the day's ride, we washed our hands and gathered for dinner. That was when the trouble began.

A couple of handicraft merchants were fussing over their seven- or eight-year-old child, whose cough alarmed the other patrons at the inn.

"Hey," someone whispered. "Are you sure that kid doesn't have the Ashen Nightmare?"

The atmosphere in the room abruptly shifted. People's faces colored with fear and apprehension as they distanced themselves from

the child. Underlying that was a strong desire for self-preservation, which often encouraged people to shrink away or even consider eliminating the source of danger—in this case, the infected.

I stepped forward to intervene before things got violent.

“Please wait a moment.” I hurried over to the couple and knelt next to the coughing child, inspecting them. I requested some boiled water from a person I assumed worked at the inn and then turned to the mother. Before I could inquire as to when the coughing symptoms first appeared, the child started vomiting.

Muted shrieks and gasps rang out around the room.

There was talk that the bodily fluids of an infected person were the physical manifestation of the disease. I’d heard about that before, and in a sense, they weren’t entirely wrong.

“It’s all right,” I cooed as I took the child in my arms, stroking their back as they continued hacking and heaving.

Even their own parents had pulled away instinctively when they heard someone mention the words “Ashen Nightmare.” Their expressions were mixed with apprehension, guilt, and love. They wanted to comfort their child but were afraid.

I recognized those emotions and nodded, keeping my voice calm and low as I repeated, “It’s all right.”

Once the child had finished retching, I pressed my hand to their forehead to check for a fever and turned back to the other patrons. “I think it’s a simple cold, but we need to clean the area since they vomited. Please get me some alcohol, quickly. I believe this region has some particularly strong distilled liquor which will do the job. We should also quarantine the inn so people can’t enter or leave for the day, and boil as much water as we can.”

“For a whole day?!”

““As much water as we can”? It’s winter! Our resources are kinda limited here!”

While sounds of protest erupted around me, I remained composed. “Disinfecting an area with alcohol is something doctors commonly do as well. If we’re diligent and careful, the disease won’t spread. Besides, there’s no guarantee this child even has the Ashen Nightmare. If you can’t prepare enough water to boil, then you should have steam baths at least, yes? Ralshen has adopted them from Norn, I believe. That should be easy to prepare since you have so many mines in this area from which to draw heat stones. If you don’t have the supplies to boil a dozen pots of water, then we can use the steam bath to circulate steam through the building instead.”

I was wracking my brain for the best steps to take given our circumstances and relaying those instructions to everyone one by one.

“The plague is just like the normal cold in that it thrives in the

winter when the air is dry. It's known to recede and weaken during summer because the disease is weak to heat and humidity. Research has shown as much. Many of you tend to take steam baths when you start getting cold-like symptoms, yes?"

The child in my arms was slumped and heaving, as if each breath was more painful than the last. The urgency of their condition was not lost on me, but I had to keep my words measured lest we botch the first few crucial measures to ensure no spread occurred.

One of the patrons asked, "Are you a doctor or something?" Their tone was understandably skeptical; I was dressed as a mere boy, an attendant-in-training.

"No, but—"

"Throw them out!" someone's strangled cry interrupted.

I flinched in surprise, and a chorus of agreement rang out as others joined in, directing their hostility toward the child and me.

"Yeah, throw them all out!"

The couple swallowed hard, clinging to each other. Even the rasping child in my arms began sobbing. I squeezed them close, gaze fixed on those jeering at us. What I saw was not anger and hatred but a deep-seated terror.

"You're fine with that even if it means you all might be infected?" I asked. My voice was still partially drowned out by their shouting, but at least one of them heard me and paled. My lips thinned. They were only condemning us out of fear.

Sixteen years ago when the Ashen Nightmare first broke out, the government recommended inns and eateries implement sinks at the front entrance of their establishments. They believed that by having people wash their hands and rinse out their mouths, they could prevent the spread of the disease. High-class restaurants, inns, and even noblemen's estates in the capital and surrounding regions were all equipped with these. However, I had seen for myself during this journey that the same could not be said of where human traffic was the strongest; businesses lining the highways not only didn't have sinks at their entrances, they often didn't even understand their necessity.

"The Ashen Nightmare does spread from one person to another, but the primary source of transmission is oral, according to researchers. Some of you have already finished your meals, haven't you? You're just as likely to have been infected, then." While I did feel guilty for spreading fear without proof, I kept my voice level and continued, "You catch this the same as any cold. If we take the appropriate measures now, we can significantly decrease the chances of it spreading. I'm not a doctor, however I *have* learned a great deal about the Ashen Nightmare. Please listen to me and take preventative

care.”

Murmurs erupted as they glanced among themselves.

Mabel slipped through the crowd with Jean hot on her heels. At Mabel's order, the latter was carrying a bucket of boiled water and a number of rags.

“Out of the way,” she barked, more commanding than I'd ever heard her before. As soon as she navigated her way through the spectators, she hurried on over to me and got to work.

Lord Alan soon joined us, carrying some liquor with him. A man, who I could only assume was the innkeeper, followed close behind him, frazzled and dismayed. “Ah, hold on there, that's my finest brew!”

“Don't worry, my good man, I'll be sure to work it off later.” Lord Alan poured a copious amount of alcohol on a clean rag, prompting the innkeeper to blanch and clutch at his chest.

While I felt guilty for making so many demands, there was still more that needed to be done.

“Innkeep,” I said, “you told us about your steam baths when we first arrived. Have some heat stones carried in there and create as much steam as you can to fumigate the inn.”

“B-But the steam bath fee...”

Mabel turned her sharp, unrelenting glare on him. “Which is more important to you, your life or your money?”

“Personally, I think they're both quite important,” Lord Alan chimed in jovially, smiling at the child in my arms as they gargled and cleaned their mouth. “You must be frightened. Sorry you have to go through this. Everyone here is just scared of the sickness spreading.” His tone was warm and soothing.

Mabel, meanwhile, turned her icy gaze on the patrons who were standing around staring at us. “Innkeep, considering the possibility of disease spreading in here, perhaps it might be best if you drove out the guests idly standing around.”

Several men jumped the moment they heard that and scrambled. “Sorry, old man, but it's an emergency,” they said as they hurried to the steam bath.

“Can't we just circulate some air through here?” one of them asked me before they went.

“Unfortunately, no. That won't help,” I said, shaking my head. I was thankful that at least for the moment they were choosing to put their faith in me.

On the off chance that this really was the Ashen Nightmare, I asked the innkeeper to send for a real doctor, but he shook his head.

“We don't have any doctors here. They all headed for Mt. Urma to help with the outbreak there.” He sighed. “What is the regional lord

even doing to help out right now?" There was a hint of resignation in his voice. It was a sharp reminder that Sauslind's government was partially responsible for the suffering of the people here—and by extension, that meant I was as well.

Without any doctors or herbalists in the area, I suspected it might be difficult to find what I was looking for, but since this village was close to the mines, I decided to take my chances and ask.

"Does anyone here have any Kenneth's Herb?"

"Kenneth's Herb?" the people echoed, mystified by my question.

The merchant couple behind me looked similarly puzzled as Mabel approached and handed off the child to the mother after having thoroughly cleaned them up.

As I suspected, information about the herb hasn't made its way to the people out here.

Vexed by this development, I chewed on my lip, combing my memories for any other herbs that might be effective in prevention or treatment.

"Wait," said a voice. I almost didn't hear them over the rest of the clamor as people moved around the busied hall. But when I followed the sound, I spotted a child with chestnut-colored hair at the edge of the crowd.

Chapter 5: The Princess's Inn Reformation

Kenneth's Herb was named after the entomologist Kenneth Blood. On top of his research on insects, he also studied plants. He discovered a rare herb growing inside a mine and included an entry of it in his insect journal. If it had been an unremarkable plant, his notes would have probably gone unnoticed. However, when the Ashen Nightmare first began its spread sixteen years ago, the pomelo fruit was the only effective treatment against it. People soon realized shipments of the fruit wouldn't make it up north, and they had to turn to something else.

So what did they do? Did they rely on dried pomelo instead? Did they drag their infected bodies to the southern lands? Or did they wait, hoping Sauslind would extend the hand of salvation toward them? The answer was none of those, actually. Since they couldn't get shipments of the pomelo fruit, they needed something that offered the same effects. Desperate, Ralshen's people started searching, and that's when they found it—Kenneth's Herb.

Medical research proving its effectiveness only came out in the third year of the outbreak, just as the Ashen Nightmare was beginning to subside. Public discourse turned to lighter topics as people tried to distract themselves from the lingering shadows of the disease, and knowledge about Kenneth's Herb and its benefits never took root. I only recalled its existence as we were making preparations at Earl Ralshen's estate. The herb was rare and only grew naturally inside of mines, making it difficult to harvest. And because few people took note of its relevance, not many had stockpiled it.

Perhaps the people had grown too complacent these past sixteen years. But we could reflect and lament our shortcomings all we wanted later. For now, I educated everyone present on the effectiveness of Kenneth's Herb and requested the cooperation of the child who claimed to have some with them.

Said child was from a healer family and had close ties with the innkeep. Apparently, thanks to fortuitous timing, they had just come into town to deliver some herbs. I bought up all the Kenneth's Herb they had and asked them to boil it for me. Lord Alan was the one who paid in my stead. I hesitated over whether to demand the innkeep and the others present pitch in for their share, but since knowledge of the

herb wasn't widespread and we needed them all to drink it, I figured it best not to charge them. Once they realized its effectiveness, knowledge of it would spread naturally by word of mouth.

I do feel bad having Lord Alan fund everything, but I don't even have a single dora to my name.

"I swear I will pay you back," I said, hanging my head apologetically.

He cheerfully responded, "It's a necessary expense, so I'll be compensated for it. No worries!"

His reassurance brought great relief, but in the background Jean mumbled skeptically, "You're writin' off everything as a 'necessary expense'..."

At any rate, I informed everyone that we would be taking the utmost precaution and using every preventative step we could. I had them wash every exposed part of their body, as well as their hands and faces. Gargling was also imperative. Moreover, I cautioned them against touching anything before they started their meals and instructed them to eat their bread first lest they risk infection by touching other things. The innkeep insisted that would be too difficult. Here in the north, it was customary for people to peel off chunks from a hard loaf of bread and dip it in their soup, meaning they would have their hands all over the table.

"In that case, please toast the bread."

"Toast it?" He bunched up his forehead.

I carefully considered the differences between northern and southern cuisine as I explained. Basically, as long as they didn't grab the bread with their bare hands, it was fine to eat. "It's common in many regions to dip hard bread in one's soup, however..."

In places densely populated by men doing hard labor, there was a preference for heartier, denser food. This naturally meant the cuisine veered more toward meat and hard breads. Which was why I suggested...

"Cut the bread up into bite-sized chunks and fry it up with oil and spices. In the Miseral Dukedom, they often boil it in with their soup. So how about toasting it with some oil and sprinkling it over the soup? Instead of just cutting it up and throwing it on there as is, putting in some extra effort to toast it will add to the flavor and texture. Plus, by heating it and having them eat it all with a spoon, you'll lower the chances of transmission here as well."

"Aha." The man's eyes gleamed with fascination.

"For any meat on the bone, wrap it in Makela's Herb. We're also using that plant in the steam baths to help fumigate the inn. According to the herbalism journal I read, it acts as a disinfectant. As long as people only eat it in small doses, it shouldn't be harmful to the

body. I would warn you against using it with cold food, however. It will lose its disinfectant properties and taste terribly bitter.”

His eyes widened a fraction as he nodded. “We have Makela’s Herb in stock.” He immediately set about instructing the cook so he could test my advice.

Although he was reluctant to let us fumigate the entire inn and fill the rooms with steam, the innkeeper begrudgingly compromised. He wouldn’t, however, agree to closing the inn or kitchen down for the day. A full twenty-four hours was preferable for disinfecting the area so that there was no chance of transmission, but since his livelihood depended on this inn, I could hardly argue the point. Especially since Sauslind couldn’t guarantee him compensation for whatever losses he incurred.

“Very well,” I acquiesced. “In that case...”

Again, I went over the precautions he should take since he refused to quarantine the place. We needed all of the patrons to enter the steam baths so they could sweat out the toxins and purify themselves. Those who ate downstairs needed to wash their hands and gargle beforehand. And, of course, they were to eat with utensils. If people were gathering in the main room, it needed to be moisturized and ventilated.

And finally...

“When people depart from the inn, please have them drink some boiled Kenneth’s Herb before you send them off.”

“You want me to have them drink it while they’re here *and* before they leave?” He quirked a brow at me, but I merely nodded my head.

It was important to take precautions against the disease here, but even more paramount was making sure no one carried it with them when they left, thereby infecting other areas. The main reason the Ashen Nightmare spread so rampantly in the Ralshen Region before was because, as some researchers suggested, they had a habit of being isolationists. Those in the north tended to be wary of outsiders. They relied more on their own local remedies instead of the ones sanctioned by the government, largely because of the distrust they held toward the royal family.

It was a reminder that the people were the ones who suffered for the mistakes of our past. That thought weighed on me as I made an earnest plea to the innkeeper, trying to do the best I could with the resources we had.

“I realize what I have asked doesn’t cover all the time, effort, or even the cost of staying here, but I respectfully ask for your cooperation. I hope even after we leave, you will continue to take these precautions and make them customary at your inn.”

All I could do was pray that the preventative measures we took

would spread amongst the people to help prevent transmission.

He gave me the kind of weary, distressed look you would expect from a merchant who loathed cutting their profits.

Before he could protest or rebuff me, a light voice interrupted. "It's worth a try, right?" It was Prince Irvin, who was helping out some of the other patrons by placing heating stones all over the inn. "A safe and credible reputation is worth its weight in gold, old man. It might put you in the red right now, but people will spread word that no one who comes here catches the disease. Soon enough you'll be a top-class establishment. If that happens, we'll have to go elsewhere, yeah?"

A group of robust men nearby chuckled and nodded. "You got that right."

"Come on, innkeep, man up."

As they egged him on, a quiet voice chimed in. "I don't mind prioritizing your inn for shipments of Kenneth's Herb." Gene, as they had earlier introduced themselves, was handing out boiled medicine to the other patrons. Their added support was enough to make the innkeeper hang his head in defeat.

"Today feels like a huge turning point in my life. That must be what this is. It has to be. I'm sure of it. There's no doubt..."

Apparently, such philosophical mumbling was his way of coping with his own resignation.

A cacophony of anguished voices echoed throughout the main hall. Although, I swear on the honor of my family as well as the owner's that they weren't crying because they were sick. The source of their distress was actually the Kenneth's Herb that Gene boiled. People were drinking it and reacting to the pungent flavor.

"Tastes like I'm drinking dirt from the bowels of the underworld."

"I think even the guardian to the underworld would tell you their dirt tastes better than this. Plainly speaking, it tastes like shit," said Prince Irvin, not bothering to sugarcoat his disgust.

In contrast, his servant drank silently, but the expression on the man's beautiful face spoke more than his mouth ever could.

Jean, meanwhile, was wrinkling his nose *and* grumbling profusely. "See, this is why you can't trust someone who hates sweets. Gotta be honest, I think anyone who hates sugary stuff is an enemy of the people."

It's not that I hate sweet things. I simply prefer not to eat them.

"Bottoms up!" One of the miners threw their head back and gulped down the elixir. Almost immediately they whipped around toward the innkeeper and said, "Hey, old man! I need some booze to wash this crap down!" Other voices soon concurred, demanding the

same. Perhaps part of their dissatisfaction was the heat and humidity in the room, created by the steam.

While the innkeeper personally scrambled to take and fulfill people's orders, I thanked Gene for their assistance. I then acquired some other medicine from them and made my way to the room where the merchant couple were staying with their sickly child.

Mabel accompanied me and told the mother, "Their fever might worsen in the coming hours." She then proceeded to offer additional advice, such as, "Make sure they get plenty of water. If their fever goes up, get them into a steam bath. But don't make the room any hotter than necessary. A fever going up isn't necessarily a bad thing." And so on.

I handed the parents the medicine I'd brought with me, explaining its effects—that it would reduce the child's fever and coughing—as well as what dosage to give them and when. By the time I finished and turned to slip out of the door, I found myself thinking how grateful I was that Mabel was here. But before I could make it far, a feeble voice stopped me.

"Thank you, Mister..." It was the child, calling out to me from their bed. The parents promptly echoed their own words of gratitude.

I shook my head. "Take care of yourselves."

"If you need anything during the night—anything at all—you just let me know," said Mabel as she followed me out of the room.

As we made our way toward the dining hall, I said, "Thank you again, Mabel. I'm so glad you're with me."

Her feet suddenly stopped. "No," she mumbled quietly, clutching a hand over her chest, face drawn with torment. "I...wasn't able to do anything. When people started panicking that it might be the Ashen Nightmare, I just froze with fear." She clenched her fist as though gripping her own regrets tight in her hand.

She continued, "The medical knowledge I have about children and their illnesses is something I learned while I was helping my mother and grandmother. I've never had to deal with an emergency situation like this. I was so confident that I could do the job even if disaster struck. Yet when it actually happened, I was powerless."

She was lamenting that she had all of this medical knowledge—which was the whole reason she had accompanied me—and yet when the time came for her to actually use it, she was too paralyzed to act. I could tell how much she was blaming herself by the way she chewed on her lip.

"Mabel..." I reached toward her, placing my hand over her tight fist. Her shoulders jumped in surprise, obstinate eyes peering up at me. In a quiet exhale, I confessed the truth. "I was scared, too."

My hand had been trembling the entire time. Whatever decision I

made could have a permanent impact on people's lives. If I made a single misstep, it might mean someone's death.

"That's why," I said, "although I don't know exactly how you're feeling, it did give me a greater appreciation for how difficult a doctor's work is. I couldn't have done all of this by myself, Mabel. It's because you were with me that I got through it. Thank you."

Her brows pinched. After a moment, she squeezed my hand and drew it up, pressing it against her forehead. She remained like that for a while.

No matter how brave a front Mabel tried to put on, it was only natural for her to be as scared as any of the rest of us. I reached over with my free hand and stroked the top of her head, her hair silky smooth against my fingertips.

Some men suddenly came down a nearby corridor and started whistling at us. "Oh? Is the servant boy comforting his master? What pure love. I'm jealous. Let me get in on some of that action."

"If you get in on it, it'll end up—"

Mabel clapped her hands over my ears, so I wasn't able to hear whatever words came after that.

I feel like someone did this same thing to me once before...

I had no idea what words they traded, but the ferocious glare Mabel shot in their direction was enough to send the men scrambling. By the time she dropped her hands away, her expression was grave and her eyes housed a terrifying glint.

"Once we're finished looking after that child, we need to leave this inn behind. Fumigating it will only do so much. You could put a kettle under this place and heat it past boiling, but it still wouldn't cleanse the crude lot that has taken up residence here. Honestly, this is why men are so..."

It feels like I'm seeing a whole new side of her right now.

We entered the dining hall to find Lord Alan gaily singing away. He was recounting the story of the Hero King, as well as other fictitious tales popular with the common folk. They appreciated Lord Alan's accounts far more than the nobles back home, cheering and laughing loudly. The intense enthusiasm in the room was enough to make it suffocatingly stuffy. Patrons were downing bottle after bottle of alcohol, too.

Lord Alan certainly does have a knack for blending in with the crowd, I thought to myself as I made my way to the table where Prince Irvin and Jean were sitting. Along the way, I received a number of comments.

"Pretty clever for being such a tiny guy."

"You might be skin and bones now, but eat some proper grub, train up, and you'll be big and strong like me some day."

“Get ya some meat! Meat, I say!”

They were all very kind to me. Although, a number of them did try making passes at Mabel, perhaps because it was rare to see an unmarried woman traveling around this area. She silenced them all with a glacial glare, not unlike Lord Alexei.

It was a bittersweet experience for me. There I was, a young woman who had only barely reached adulthood and had a marriage ceremony looming only months away, and yet no one even blinked an eye at my disguise or doubted it. Perhaps there really was a problem with me. Silently, I swore to myself to recite the methods Duchess Rosalia taught me for enticing the prince every night before I went to bed.

When we settled down at the table, Jean was already digging into his meal, though he had tears in his eyes as he did so. “It’s so freakin’ hot. First I gotta drink that nasty medicine crap and now I gotta eat this spicy food? What’s with this? Are we at some kinda trainin’ camp? They never fed me slop like this at the earl’s estate.”

That was probably because Earl Ralshen had his chefs adjust the food to something that would suit our palates. Apparently that led Jean to falsely believe that the cuisine here primarily relied on dairy, but actually it was customary to use numerous spices to heat up the body here. According to the local history, the people traditionally chased down spices with strong alcohol in order to prevent colds.

After I explained as much to Jean, he screwed up his face. “If I’d known this from the beginnin’, I’d never have agreed to come.”

This was the same man who, upon seeing me disguised as a boy, remarked, “Suits you perfectly, miss. By the looks of you, no one would ever dream you’re actually a girl.” He also gave me a thumbs up as a sign of his approval.

At the time, I secretly debated asking my father to reduce his pay as punishment when we got back to the capital, but he was already getting his just deserts thanks to the cuisine here.

Prince Irvin chuckled quietly, nursing a cup of liquor as he said, “I never get tired of listening to the two of you.”

And then finally, he explained why he was here.



Chapter 6: The Prince's Letter

"A lead, you say?"

If it was information that led him all the way to Sauslind, that meant whatever it was pertained to our country as well. There was only one possibility.

"Something to do with the Ashen Nightmare?"

The plague was spreading in Maldura as well. Since His Majesty fell ill with it right as the delegation was visiting, the pro-war faction was proposing an invasion.

Prince Irvin smirked. "Well, that is part of it." He pulled out a small object from his pocket. As he peeled back the cloth it was wrapped in, all I saw was an ordinary rock.

"And this is...?"

"A type of ore in such high demand that we can't produce it fast enough. You know about the heat stones used for steam baths that can be extracted from mines in Ralshen and Norn, yes? It has similar properties, but it's far more potent and has gained quite the attention this past year. If we ship these overseas, they'll give us a whole mountain of gold in return."

"Goodness." I blinked at it. Heat stones could be mined from the mountains here in Ralshen, and they differed from normal rocks because once heated, they maintained that temperature for far longer—almost an entire day. They could be used as an energy source, and in fact, I'd heard that they had been applying them to naval technology lately. It was surprising to hear that this new stone was even more powerful.

Beside me, Mabel gradually swallowed down her food, brows drawn in suspicion. "And what has that got to do with Sauslind?"

"No, hold on a moment," I said.

He mentioned "overseas." That word weighed on me. Sauslind had yet to hear about this new ore, and yet Prince Irvin claimed they could get a whole mountain of gold from the other continent by trading it. As I contemplated the implications of this, I finally understood.

It can't be...

I glanced up at Prince Irvin, who was smirking in amusement. "So the reason I am being targeted isn't because of my position as the prince's betrothed, but because whoever is doing it wants to stop us

from forming diplomatic relations with Maldura?”

“What?” Surprised, Mabel jerked her head up, peering over at me.

It was possible they were targeting me politically because of my position. However, if there was anything to be gained by removing me from my current seat, it would be...

“The sea is Maldura’s weakness. Everyone knows that. They don’t engage in much ocean trade. Whatever partner Maldura is trading with in the west—no, it’s not them. They must have someone in Sauslind smuggling it for them. That’s why they don’t want Sauslind and Maldura to form diplomatic ties. Because they could make an official deal and put tariffs on it. Then there would be no benefit to smuggling it anymore.”

An ironic grin stretched across Prince Irvin’s face. “That’s why I said, if someone were to assassinate you right now, the government here would pin the blame on us. At the very least, diplomatic relations would be off the table. That much is clear.”

Mabel placed a hand over her chest, trying to stifle her surprise. As she recalled the terror she felt when we were attacked, she cautiously surveyed our surroundings.

I fell into silent thought again. As Prince Irvin continued his explanations, I wondered why there was such a sarcastic tone in his voice—why everything he said seemed twisted and barbed.

“Well, whether you’re the one who starts it or the kingdom does it on its own, if our countries go to war, Maldura has no chance of winning. Most of our people are sick with the Ashen Nightmare. Maybe that’s the mastermind’s aim—to corner us and take control of our mines so they can keep all the profit for themselves.” Prince Irvin spun the rock around on his fingertips, taking a drink from his cup with his other hand. His servant gave him an admonishing glare.

“That’s not it,” I said. “If that were the case, then there would be no point in you coming here. Most likely, whoever is responsible doesn’t care whether war happens or not. They simply don’t want our countries to ally with one another.” I stared straight into his black eyes as I continued. “There is a pipeline for smuggling it overseas, and just as someone is reaping the benefits in Sauslind, someone in Maldura is profiting as well. The reason you came here was to investigate that, no?”

After a short pause, his lips quirked up. There was a glint in his eyes, dubious yet inviting. “Can’t say for sure. What if I told you I wasn’t actually lying when I said I came here to kidnap you?”

Mabel launched herself up from her chair. Its legs scraped noisily against the floor. I had to jerk around to stop her. Lord Alan’s singing was drawing all of the attention to himself right now, but if she caused a scene, their eyes would be on us in seconds.

“You are hopeless,” spat Prince Irvin’s servant. “This happens every time. You need to fix that awful habit you have of wanting women who are already taken.”

“Oh dear,” I mumbled. Both Mabel and I stared at him coldly.

Prince Irvin put a hand to his chest. “You wound me. Do you really think I would try something with a foreign girl merely for the fun of it? Especially considering how absolutely terrifying that fiancé of hers is?”

“Isn’t the danger exactly what excites you?”

“Well, you *do* have a point, but even I have enough discretion to know who I can and can’t play such games with.”

My gaze and Mabel’s only grew colder the deeper he dug his grave. Not that Prince Irvin seemed the least bit concerned with our reactions.

His servant sighed again, turning his attention back to me. “At any rate, there’s another more probable reason for you being targeted that has to do with who you are.”

Everyone turned their eyes toward me, but I merely tilted my head, clueless as to what he meant. Other than being the prince’s betrothed and the one responsible for advocating peace with Maldura, what else could there be?

Exasperated, the servant blurted out, “There’s a good chance you could be carrying the next heir to the throne inside you.”

“What?!” Mabel and Jean cried in unison.

Prince Irvin’s eyes gleamed silently. “So he’s already made a move on her, hm?”

Is this the part where I’m supposed to maintain my dignity as a noble lady and insist on my own purity?

Prince Irvin’s servant looked entirely unperturbed, as if he saw nothing wrong with his statement. Perhaps it was a cultural difference?

“It’s quite common in Maldura,” he said, “for the date of the wedding and the birth of the child to not match up. Sauslind seems to emphasize traditional customs, but... I’m sure those sorts of accidents still happen, no?”

Mabel glanced over at me with a look of realization on her face. “On the road, I remember that topic coming up. Now it makes sense why someone like me from a line of midwives was chosen as your maid...”

You’re completely misunderstanding the situation, Mabel.

Jean gave a dry chuckle. “Nah, it’s not possible. Not even a little bit. The day someone with negative sex appeal like the miss crosses that line with the demon lord will be the day all the beefy miners out here wind up pregnant from immaculate conception.”

I don't even know where to begin to comment on that, but what you're saying makes absolutely no sense, Jean.

While I was inwardly fretting over how best to defend my purity, Jean was already doing my job for me.

“Give me a break. That’s like countin’ all your tanuki hides before you’ve caught the darn beasts. Except in this case, the tanuki would be the one skinnin’ me alive. Besides, the miss spends all her time in the royal archives. She’s not got the time to be messin’ around with the prince like that. Her lack of sex appeal makes that pretty obvious, doesn’t it? And it’s not like something coulda happened because I was busy takin’ an afternoon nap and just didn’t notice. Nope, definitely not that.”

It sounded more like he was already formulating an excuse in case he was wrong and I really was pregnant. Regardless, it peeved me enough that I flagged down the innkeeper and secretly requested that Jean’s next plate be extra spicy.

“Ahem,” I said, clearing my throat in an attempt to dispel the awkward atmosphere that had settled over us. “At any rate, that is yet another possible reason they could be targeting me. I’ll keep that in mind. Being in such a position, it’s only natural for people to come after me. The more pressing issue is that we need to quickly get a message to Lord Alexei.”

There was still so much we had to do: quell the revolts, tend to the infected, and confirm the size of the spread.

“Most importantly,” Mabel interjected, having regained her composure. Her voice was tinged with distrust. “It’s clear we should be concerning ourselves with whoever is behind all of this. And on that note, I think the people we should be most suspicious of are right here with us.”

Surprised, I lifted my gaze to see her pinning Prince Irvin with a glare.

“Eli—or El, rather—is too trusting of other people. Considering who these men really are, it’s perfectly possible they want to take you as a hostage to use in negotiations with His Highness,” she said.

My shoulders jumped as I realized she could well be right. After all, the pro-war faction had taken the Malduran delegation captive, and their representative was Prince Irvin’s elder brother. My apprehension spiked as I second-guessed myself.

Prince Irvin grinned in amusement. “Yeah, there is that possibility.” His tone was too vague for me to suss out whether he was being playful or serious.

His servant gave another sigh and voiced the same skepticism toward Mabel’s claim that I was feeling. “You’re free to doubt us if you wish, but it only benefits the enemy if we don’t cooperate.”

Mabel silently pinched her brows together.

Now it was my turn to sigh. This was a grim reminder of how difficult the prince's job was. He also had to examine every issue from multiple angles.

Prince Irvin chuckled quietly, tucking the small stone away before he lightly commented, "If that's the game you want to play, we have cause to be suspicious of you, too. If you're truly thinking about El's well-being, then you should take him back to the earl's estate. Or at least to a city with some militia to protect him. Instead, you had him hide his identity and come all the way here. Why is that?"

Mabel flinched, unnerved by his question, and her loss of composure rubbed off on me. The person who'd led us away from our pursuers and suggested I disguise myself until we got to safety—the person who'd brought us here was...

"Hm. Is it just me or does the air over here feel kinda heavy?" Lord Alan appeared behind me, snatching up the pitcher on the table to refill his glass. Despite his comment, he didn't seem bothered by the atmosphere. He threw his head back and downed the whole cup. Apparently his song was finished and he was coming over here to take a break.

When I motioned for him to sit, he happily plopped himself down.

"Ah, I'm starving. The way El proposed they make their food looks really interesting, and it seems to be a hit with the other patrons. The innkeeper said he'll give us one additional serving of fried bread on the house, but it'll cost extra to put cheese on it. He really is a businessman." As he spoke cheerfully, someone brought over his order, and Lord Alan immediately dug in.

Seeming to sense that we were all staring at him, he chuckled in the same innocent, carefree way he always did. "What, are you all feeling suspicious of me because I led us to this town?" His shoulders vibrated with laughter. "I'm not the traitor you're after. Though I do admit there's been a number of anomalies this time. But I only guided you here because a certain someone ordered me to do so." Lord Alan was quick to acknowledge our doubts as he pulled out a letter from his pocket and held it out toward me. The handwriting on it was familiar.

In that moment, it was like a dam broke and all the emotions I had been holding back welled up inside me. My hands trembled as I reached out and took it, tracing my fingers over the writing on the envelope. It read: *To Elianna*. It was like the prince was calling out to me from miles away, giving me the answer I sought.

~.~.~.~

To my dearest Elianna...

Almost as soon as I started writing the opening words for my letter, my hand paused.

With my official marriage to Elianna looming just months away, the dawn of the new year brought anxious anticipation. The excitement, however, was disrupted by a monumental announcement; Maldura would be sending a delegation here. We recalled the Black Wing Knights to the capital so they could escort Elianna on her trip to visit my great uncle. Only two days remained until she set off and embarked on her journey to Ralshen. She and others were busy preparing for the trip.

The thought of her made me turn my gaze to the spot where she usually sat in my office. Since she began visiting the palace after our initial engagement, she spent over half of her time here reading books.

A long time ago, I wrote, although my thoughts were still stuck in the present. But as my pen continued moving, my mind turned back to the past.

A long time ago, back when we first met, I used to fancy myself some kind of adventurer as I searched for signs of her amid the bookshelves. Saoura's royal library was so expansive that a child could easily get lost inside. Although the two of us made no promises to meet, nor did she ever tell me which aisle she would be occupying next, I always enjoyed trying to guess where I would find her.

As the only direct heir to the throne, I had a very limited amount of free time despite my young age. That meant I had only a short time to navigate this enormous library and sniff her out. At first, I did it because I found it entertaining. It gave me the same thrill as outwitting my professors when they gave me a difficult problem to solve. Many of said professors were deeply devoted to the royal family, and when they realized I was more intelligent than them despite being a child, they got the idea in their head that they needed to show me how cruel the world could really be. I derived the most enjoyment out of besting those types.

I felt the same way when I first met Eli. She had no compunction about raising a hand at me and scolding me despite my superior status. The fact that she frequented the royal library indicated she was a part of noble society as well. I remember thinking she was an eccentric young girl. She surely understood her place in the social hierarchy, yet she made no attempts to restrain her anger toward me.

Maybe she understands logically, but she's too ignorant of the world and its rules? I thought to myself.

At any rate, while I was shocked at her behavior, I also felt embarrassed for my own immaturity and for taking out my anger in such a destructive way. I tried having a conversation with the odd

girl, but unsurprisingly, it didn't work out very well. Once she started reading, it didn't matter how much I tried to chat with her; she wouldn't even give me a glance. Me, the crown prince!

Naturally, I tried to get in her good graces through the normal means, by using things most girls her age liked: sweets, cute flowers, and popular gossip around the kingdom. Once she finished her book and flipped the cover shut, she relaxed her guard enough to accept one of the sweets I offered without blinking an eye at it. A moment later, her lips puckered in surprise and disgust. It made me wonder if there was some kind of mistake—if the sweets I'd selected were sour somehow.

That can't be. The cooks in the palace made these personally, I told myself. Weird. I didn't know girls twisted their faces like that.

As I stood there frozen, my longtime chamberlain retrieved some water for her to wash it down. All I could do was watch.

After gulping down the contents of the cup, she finally sighed and said, "I dislike sweet things."

"Sorry," I mumbled, but she'd already put her guard back up.

You don't have to be so wary of me...

Next, I asked the royal gardener to prepare her a bouquet. As you might imagine, she wasn't the least bit interested in it. She instead started explaining to me the medicinal properties of the flowers I'd picked.

Then she told me to take it home with me, even though I meant it for her as a gift.

She didn't hold any interest in popular palace gossip, either. What really pulled her attention and made her eyes shine with curiosity were unpublished treatises written by historians—something only a select group of researchers would have any inclination to read.

What kind of alternate reality am I living in here?

My chamberlain tried to stifle his laughter numerous times as he stood behind me and watched all this play out, but I was digging myself deeper and deeper, going past the point of no return. She was like a riddle—intensely difficult to solve.

Fine. Bring it on.

At first, it was mere curiosity. She entertained me.

Yesterday, she was reading through texts on medicine and anatomy. Would I find her in the same section today? No, perhaps it only *looked* like she was interested in anatomy. Maybe I would find her in the fine arts section, sifting through tomes depicting the human shape. As I navigated the library floor, I used my powers of deduction to locate her. I eventually found her in the mystery section, of all places.

How in the world does her brain work?

She was seated on a chair by the window, scanning through a book. It was an unusual sight, namely because I rarely saw her on the ground. Normally, she was perched at the top of a ladder propped up against one of the shelves. I had to crane my neck to see the title on the cover. Since she was a girl, I wondered if these kinds of texts didn't frighten her at all.

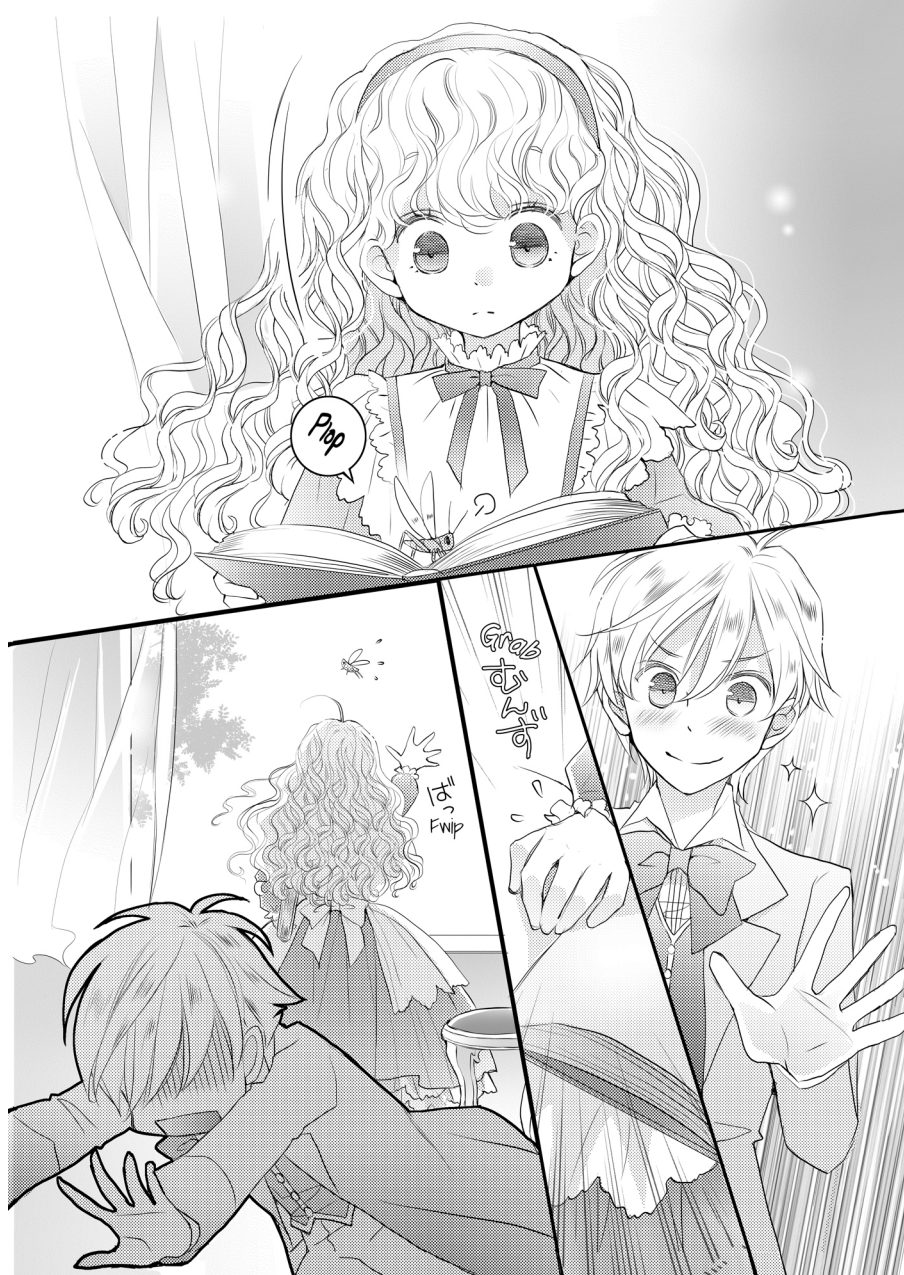
A grasshopper suddenly sprang through the window, landing directly on top of her head as if intending to rest its wings there.

Should I be a gentleman here and get rid of it for her?

I didn't have long to contemplate because it hopped down onto the opened pages of her book.

Okay, girls absolutely hate insects, so this is my chance. Once she screams, I'll swoop in and—

The young Elianna snatched the grasshopper up in her hand and released it out the window. She then promptly returned to her reading as if nothing had happened. It was over in the blink of an eye. I didn't even get a chance to save her.



Behind me, my chamberlain was struggling desperately to hold in his laughter after watching me fail spectacularly.

How annoying. As if anyone could have anticipated the way she handled that.

As I sulked, I tried to puzzle out why she was reading such a book. It was written for children, but the contents were hair-raisingly scary.

Wait, but I'm pretty sure the author was involved in medicine in his past. That must be why she's reading it.

I nodded to myself, pleased with the answer I'd produced.

No, wait a minute.

What was wrong with me? Did I fancy myself some kind of boy detective, feeling some kind of achievement from working out this girl's mysteries? My real objective in the beginning was to solve the enigma that was Elianna Bernstein. But I suddenly started questioning myself. Why did I feel such a desire to do that in the first place? I'd met plenty of other eccentric people before. There were others with odd personalities that piqued my interest—people of all ages and genders. What made this girl so special? Was it because she came up with the idea of wanting a library made of doctors? Or was it because she helped close the rift between my mother and me? Or was it because she had such a drastically different point of view and taught me so much?

When I decided I wanted to figure her out, I kept it a secret from everyone else. That included my childhood friends, Alex and Glen, to whom I confided most everything. I never mentioned to them that I was coming to the library each day to seek her out because...she was my treasure.

Maybe I was wrong from the beginning when I assumed I only took an interest in her out of curiosity or because she entertained me. I probably fell in love with her the moment she got so genuinely angry with me over those books that she didn't even care about our difference in status.

I mumbled her name to myself quietly. Unsurprisingly, she didn't lift her head to look at me, but that was fine.

What a mess, I thought as the tension in my shoulders eased. I'd spent so long bound and determined to solve her mysteries only to fail each time, which just made me more obstinate. I kept trying to fit her in a box like I had with all the other people I'd met, but there was no need for that anymore. It was fine if she remained an enigma—one that neither I nor anyone else could untangle.

Someday, I'll make you look at me the same way you look at those books.

"Eli..." I mumbled her name as I watched the wind spill through

the window, buffeting her soft locks of hair. I had to resist the urge to touch them.

I was too reckless after realizing my feelings for her and failed spectacularly. She left the capital, and no matter how much I searched the library, I would never see her there again. The time I spent trying to puzzle out her thought process and capture her attention was all wasted. No longer could I enjoy that fluffy hair that seemed to melt in the background or those gorgeous eyes. My treasure was gone, and it was all my fault.

That's why I never want to experience those feelings or that regret ever again, I thought to myself as I recalled how empty I'd felt in her absence.

I tightened my grip on the quill pen.

A number of suspicious things had happened lately. One of the most obvious was last year's hunting festival. A bunch of insurgents entered Sauslind at the time, targeting Maldura's elite as well as core members of Sauslind's government. The course of the investigation ultimately led me to the Miseral Dukedom. Lady Ramond, or rather Mireille, was also following a similar lead, albeit from a different angle. That was how the two of us wound up exchanging information.

I matched what I learned from her with the data I was getting from the Ministry of Finance and other departments, as well as the events from our past. Together, they painted an alarming picture of what might lie in our future: there was a very real possibility the Ashen Nightmare would come back. No, in fact, signs of it were already appearing in Maldura.

So what should we do?

I sucked in a breath.

The answer was clear. I had to entrust the matter to Elianna. Based on my predictions, it would be difficult for me to make any moves. No, if I did anything, the culprit behind all of this would likely sink back into the shadows. Then they would be beyond our reach. We couldn't keep repeating this cycle. We needed to pull out this weed by the root.

But how do I do that?

There was only one person I trusted to get us out of this predicament, and that was Elianna.

I stared at the spot where she usually sat, arguing back and forth in my head. Was this really the right choice? Or was I a coward for pushing this burden onto her? Wasn't there any other way?

My eyes snapped shut. The cogs were already in motion. The only person I could entrust this to—the only one capable of handling it—was Elianna. It was fine if my letter never made it to her, but I was

also confident somehow that it would.

Determination renewed, I realized I had to write down everything I could for her. The present wasn't a repeat of the past. I knew full well that it was purely my maneuvering that led to our engagement, but she was the one who decided to lift her head and take responsibility for what her new title entailed. She wanted to be my crown princess, to walk beside me.

My lips moved to speak her name, though no noise came out.

With hope in my heart, I wrote down the truth about the country's state of affairs. I did consider openly telling her everything beforehand, but I couldn't dismiss the possibility that we had a traitor close to us. It was impossible to know what information could jeopardize her safety, and much of it was speculation. There was no guarantee that my suspicions weren't misplaced.

In the end, this letter is just insurance. You are our true trump card, Elianna. I'm going to let go of your hand now. I no longer believe that love means shielding someone from everything and keeping them far away from danger. I already made that mistake once before. I didn't think about your feelings or your position. All I did was indulge in my selfish desire to have you at my side, and I wound up facing those rotten tanuki, who were far more clever and insidious than anything I'd dealt with before.

Now it makes sense why my father and the prime minister mumbled under their breaths, "Good luck, our little star of hope." Obviously, their attempts at "support" were completely insincere.

Even after I welcomed you to the palace as my betrothed, a part of me still saw you as this entertaining enigma. Those feelings began to fade at some point because you started taking an interest in the real world. As you navigated your way through human interaction and began building relationships with other people, I watched you stumble and lose your way. At times you were depressed and at times you were anxious, but you poured all your effort into overcoming all of that.

I yearned to call for her, but her name sat on my lips, unspoken.

I'm dragging you into a dangerous situation, and I'm suppressing the urge to protect you from it all. You put your trust in me, and I want to live up to that. I want to make you proud.

And so I wrote to her everything we knew about the possibility of the plague's resurgence. We had only one clue for finding a cure, and that was Furya's Jar.

The person possessing it lives in a mining town called Hersche. And most likely, you're the only person who has a chance of tying all these loose threads together, Elianna.

Chapter 7: The Man-Hating Witch

“Urk,” someone groaned as an unpleasant sound rang out around us.

The mountain was buried deep in snow. We had a guide leading our group, but the poor weather conditions meant we had to stop and shovel snow periodically or use the horses to pack it down so we could walk. At times, we managed to find well-shaded pathways where we could hack through the undergrowth and slip through unimpeded. We were essentially carving out a road as we went.

“Someone wanna explain to me how this much snow can pile up overnight?” Jean grouched.

Since I wouldn’t be of any use to them, I was perched on top of a horse. Prince Irvin’s servant, Rei, was holding onto the reins.

“Enough of your whining,” Prince Irvin snapped. He was using a wooden shovel to shift the snow out of the way. “You sure complain a lot for a manservant. You’re not as bad as Rei, but I’d still appreciate you moving your hands more than your mouth. Pissing and moaning isn’t going to fix things. The snow won’t shovel itself.”

“Ah, right, I forgot you’re a spoiled rich boy. ‘Course you wouldn’t understand a commoner’s feelings. I know it won’t change anythin’, but at least I can grumble about it.”

“Yes, of course, taxpaying citizens have every right to protest to those in power. And I heartily encourage them to do so. Except in your case, you’re not paying me any taxes, now are you?”

“That right? Well, ’scuse me, then. Guess we commoners just have a biased view of you pampered royal folk.”

“Biased indeed. Maybe your attitude would improve a bit if you shut your mouth and actually did some work.”

“How ’bout you practice what you preach first?”

Although the two were trading barbs with one another, they were perfectly in sync. The more they exchanged their clever retorts, the faster their hands moved. That was why Rei only silently watched instead of chastising either of them.

“Physical labor isn’t really my thing,” called Lord Alan from behind me, “so I’ll be cheering you guys on from here.” He was pulling along Jean’s horse. Mabel was with him as well, not even trying to hide her exasperation with their pettiness.

Suddenly a muffled cry rang out. We turned to find Jean trapped

in a snowdrift.

Prince Irvin snickered. "What goes around comes around."

"Then you oughta be gettin' yours soon too," Jean countered, grabbing a nearby branch to lift himself out of the drift. He released it at just the right angle so the snow on the branches above would plop straight down on Prince Irvin.

"Okay, now you've done it," the foreign prince snarled.

"Ah, my bad. Wasn't on purpose though, I swear." Jean gave a half-hearted shrug.

They exchanged a brief glare before breaking into a snowball fight like a couple of rowdy children.

Do these two really understand how dire our circumstances are?

Before Rei or I could open our mouths to intervene, stray fire—or rather, a stray snowball—came spiraling toward me. I wasn't sure which one of them threw it, but it slammed into the branch above me, creating a miniature avalanche. Startled, my horse brayed and reared. I was unable to react in time and went flying through the air, slamming down into the powdery snow below.

"Eli—I mean, El!" Mabel scrambled off her horse and waded over. By the time she pulled me up, there was a human imprint left where I'd fallen.

"Slow as molasses," Jean mumbled.

Prince Irvin shook his head. "Her reflexes are dull as ever, I see."

Mabel whipped around and began reprimanding the two of them. In the midst of all of this, the person acting as our guide continued to shovel the snow without paying us any heed. They were setting a good example that I wished the other boys would follow.

Rei merely sighed at our antics.

"I wonder if we're going to be able to make it to the witch's house today," Lord Alan mumbled as he peered up. The sky was overcast.

I wonder the same thing, I thought as I sneezed. The snow clung stubbornly to my clothes.

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After I finished reading the prince's letter and discovered the true reality of our situation, I was at a loss for words for a while. The weight of his expectations renewed my determination.

Maldura and Sauslind were on the brink of war. To stop it, we needed some kind of clue so we could start on a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. I had lost sight of that, too overcome with anxiety after we were suddenly attacked and Grandpa Teddy was...injured. But the prince had foreseen some of what had already transpired, and that was why he decided to entrust me with all this information and the key to solving this epidemic.

Affection and gratitude bubbled up inside me. I wanted to hug his letter to my chest.

“I hate to rain on your little parade,” Prince Irvin cut in teasingly, “but considering we’re involved in this mess as well, care to disclose some of what you know?” Although his tone was light, his eyes were serious.

Prince Irvin had mentioned before that there was someone trying to block Maldura and Sauslind’s attempts at diplomacy. I had no doubt this information was exactly what they were looking for. Especially since this clue could bring relief to many sick and dying Maldurans. Perhaps that was the real motivating factor in why he had made contact with me.

I carefully contemplated as I opened my mouth to respond, but Lord Alan interrupted me. “Let’s save it until we get back to our rooms. Eat up first!”

“Oh,” I mumbled. A quick glance at the other patrons made me realize they were all peering over at us now that Lord Alan wasn’t singing anymore. Since the cheering had died down, it was quiet enough in here that it wasn’t really the place to be exchanging confidential information.

I tucked the prince’s letter away and spent the rest of our meal planning out how I would broach the topic with the others later. Once we were finished, we all gathered in one of the inn rooms and I shared with them what I’d learned from the missive. I also realized something. I wasn’t suited to bargaining political deals with people using information. The prince was the one who handled those sorts of things. Perhaps the situation would be different if Lord Alexei were here, but alas, he was not.

Also, there were a few things I could deduce from the information His Highness shared. The prince never stated anything concretely about who the culprit was, but that was likely because he was still in the process of gathering solid proof. Though the fact that he didn’t mention it made me suspect it was someone too high up for him to point fingers at lightly.

My decision, then, was to leave that matter to the prince. My job was to focus on the clue he’d left for me. And to that end, I needed their cooperation. Curing the Ashen Nightmare was the key to solving this whole mess, so I tried to be as forthright as possible when it came to information pertaining to the disease.

“Furya’s Jar, huh?” Irvin sniffed.

The text was considered mere legend, so it wasn’t surprising that someone from a foreign land like Maldura didn’t believe in its existence. Even Mabel, who was native to Sauslind and possessed medical expertise, drew her brows and scrunched her face.

After taking in their reactions, I added, “The book isn’t purely myth. It’s a research journal that actually exists. Chief Herbalist Nigel is the most prominent figure in his field. The person who taught him was an expert without peer, whom no other has been able to surpass when it comes to creating cures for disease. The journal they left behind may well be the key we need to create a remedy for the Ashen Nightmare.”

To an herbalist, that text was the equivalent of a real Furya’s Jar, and I sincerely believed in the possibilities it held.

Ever since I entered the palace as the prince’s betrothed, I became well acquainted with the people in the Royal Pharmacy. I saw close-up how their research into the plague was proceeding. That was exactly why I’d been able to convince General Bakula to give me a chance to find a cure. And now, I had to persuade the rest of them as well.

“We have managed to develop medicine to diagnose the Ashen Nightmare and suppress it. The goal is right in front of us. We’re only one step away, I’m sure of it. Even now, the chief herbalist is surely hard at work trying to research a cure. If we need Furya’s Jar to do that, then I’ll do whatever it takes to get my hands on it.”

This was likely the first time since my childhood that I’d ever desired a specific book so much. Back then, I cried to my father, “If we Bernsteins really love books so much, why don’t we have Furya’s Jar?”

But what I really want isn’t a text that will give us all the answers. I want a book built on people’s knowledge, one they’ve poured their blood, sweat, and tears into. If people wanted to call it Furya’s Jar because they saw it as a beacon of hope, what greater compliment could there be to those who contributed to the text?

Thus why I sought their cooperation. When I first tried to convince Grandpa Teddy, I didn’t have any leads. It was like trying to catch a cloud with my hands. Fortunately, the prince had given us our biggest, most reliable clue. There was hope yet we could find a cure.

“Dr. Furness is the author of the text we seek. The prince found information pointing to his family living in this town. I want to follow that lead and see where it takes us. Would the rest of you be willing to lend me your strength?”

Dr. Furness, the man Chief Herbalist Nigel had once apprenticed for, had already passed away. His remaining family had concealed themselves after an incident in the palace. Lord Nigel and His Highness managed to track their whereabouts to this town, but that was as far as they got. All that was left now was to ask around the area and sniff them out. Considering how ignorant of the world I was, I needed people more informed to assist me in the task.

My heartfelt request elicited a mocking smile from Prince Irvin. “If the country and the royal family can’t seek out this family openly,

there must be a really good reason for it.”

I sucked in a breath. Dr. Furness’s family did indeed have an ill connection to the royal family. The prince had mentioned the details of that in his letter, but he closed by saying I wouldn’t have any issues. All I could do was trust he was right. It was probably brazen of me to ask for their help when I wasn’t telling them everything, but there were some things I wasn’t in a position to share.

Prince Irvin’s black eyes stared me down, seeming to see right through me. After a moment, they softened. “Fine, but you’ll owe me one.”

Mabel snapped her head around, glowering at him. “You should be just as eager to get information on a cure as the rest of us. How dare you act like you’re the one doing us a favor!”

“El here is the one asking me for help, not the other way around. So of course I’m going to expect a return on my assistance when the time comes.”

“Don’t try to twist the situation,” she spat back.

As the two of them bickered, Lord Alan suddenly said, “Ah! Remember that little healer apprentice from last night? They might know something.”

I nodded, inwardly vexed that I hadn’t stopped them to talk more before we parted.

“That does seem like it’s our best bet right now,” Rei agreed.

We briefly continued discussing our plans, deciding we would work out the finer details on the morrow since it was already so late. Meanwhile, Prince Irvin and Mabel were still trading digs with one another.

Jean mumbled, “You sure this is a good idea? Our group’s already fallin’ apart.”

We set out when the sun rose the next morning, but we soon found it wouldn’t be nearly as easy as we’d hoped. First, we tried to ask the innkeeper about the child, but unfortunately they had already left to run an errand before we got up. The man’s wife informed me they were running low on supplies so he’d left in a hurry to retrieve more. I felt a bit awkward, knowing I was the one who’d put them in this situation.

One tidbit we did learn was that the healer-in-training lived in the mountains, far from the town. Only the innkeeper knew the specifics of their location. Everyone else was tight-lipped. In fact, they practically gave us the cold shoulder when we asked, so we weren’t able to find out any more than that.

We would have to wait until the innkeeper returned to learn anything else. In the meantime, we tried the proper route by having

Lord Alan check the town's address ledger. It wasn't surprising that we came up empty-handed there, too. If it were that easy to find where Dr. Furness's family lived, His Highness would have had no need to entrust the issue to me.

The only option we were left with was to split up and ask around to see what information we could glean about healers in the town. As I suspected, most of them had already left to head for the village on Mt. Urma to help the infected there.

People's anxiety was all the more palpable when speaking to them directly. Word had drifted in about how many were infected there and how dire the situation was. Since this town was a pit stop for travelers heading to and from Mt. Urma, people were naturally afraid. It didn't matter how much we spread knowledge about preventative care, the Ashen Nightmare still had a high mortality rate, and the fear it inspired in people would not be so easily extinguished. They were clamoring to get the pomelo fruit, hoping it would protect them and keep them healthy. Right now wasn't harvest season, however, so the only thing available was dried fruit. I could tell them as much, but I suspected it wouldn't change anything.

I was getting impatient as the minutes turned into hours. My only salvation was the charm (the one the prince gave me before I left) and the letter I had with me, which I clutched tightly to my chest. Now that I had faced people's fears head-on, I was even more determined.

No matter what it takes, I will find a clue to curing this disease.

I walked around the city until my legs felt like stiff boards and the sun was beginning to set. At that point, we all gathered back at the inn and reported our findings. None of us had met with much success.

We slumped in our seats, exhausted, as we sat at the dinner table. A dour mood hung over us like a cloud. It was Lord Alan who broke the depressing silence with his cheerful voice.

"At any rate, let's eat up so we can stay healthy. If finding Dr. Furness's family was so easy, Prince Chris would have already done so. We can't waste much time here, and moping about isn't going to cure the infected."

He has a point.

His words were heartening enough that I reached for my spoon. Jean was trying to push his plate away, scowling at the spicy food stacked on top, but I pushed it back toward him.

The other patrons asked Lord Alan, "Aren't you gonna sing for us tonight?"

Apparently, word of Lord Alan and his talents was making the rounds; there were more people packed into the main room today than there had been yesterday.

"Standing out this much has its pros and its cons," Lord Alan

mumbled to himself as he picked up his instrument. He glanced over at me. “El, any requests?”

“Huh?” My mouth fell open. No doubt he was simply trying to be considerate. I contemplated for a moment before answering. In the winter, the ground in Ralshen was cold and hard. We needed a song about not losing hope—about waiting for spring’s warm embrace. “Then please play *Dreaming of Winter’s End*.” It was a northern folk song.

“Sounds good!” Lord Alan casually responded. He began to sing and play as he had done the night before, with people cheering and clapping along. The melody boomed through the room, so everyone could hear.

Our group enjoyed the soothing tune as we began discussing what our plans were for tomorrow. Right as we were deciding we would head for Mt. Urma if we failed to find any leads again, the innkeeper waddled over to us.

“Sorry, I heard you were looking for me.” Apparently, his wife had informed him after he got back with their supplies, so he made his way straight to us.

My face immediately lit up when I saw him. He gave me a strained smile, probably worried I was about to point out other improvements he needed to make at the inn. I quickly dismissed his fears and asked about the child we’d met the other day.

The innkeeper pulled a face. It seemed even he wasn’t keen on discussing them. After hesitating for a moment, he finally said, “Well, I *do* owe you.” He pulled out a nearby chair, plopped down, and began telling us a story about a man-hating witch.

Long ago, there was a witch who hated everyone. She lived in the forest, far from the town. There were rumors that she performed all manner of odd experiments, so the people kept their distance. The woman also had a daughter, who was married. Unlike the witch, this girl and her husband were close with the villagers. They interacted with them often, fostering trust between them.

Then, sixteen years ago, the Ashen Nightmare broke out across Sauslind. It invaded everyone’s lives, even those ignorant of its existence, turning everything upside down. Apprehension began to build, swallowing up people’s hearts. Those affected couldn’t be saved, and the disease traveled from person to person.

As fear pervaded, the girl and her husband started making strange demands.

“Seal off Mt. Urma’s mines!” they said.

The two claimed a poisonous gas was wafting up from the mines. They said that was the cause of the disease and that Mt. Urma was the

epicenter.

I sat up straight in my chair. Something about the story clicked in my head.

The innkeeper quietly continued, "Well, in the end, people just chalked it up to crazy talk. No one would listen to them, not that I can really blame them. We'd spent years digging in those mines, and there'd been no problems before. How were people supposed to believe that it was suddenly a source of evil? Not all the miners working there got infected, either. Everyone thought it was nonsense."

True, he does have a point.

Plus, the mines were the main source of income for many living around it. They could hardly comply with a haphazard request to seal the mines off simply because someone claimed they were the source of the outbreak.

"And so," the innkeeper said, his face clouding over, "even though the infections were running rampant, people kept living their lives as if nothing had changed. Who knows why, but that girl and her husband suddenly went into the mines. There was some kinda collapse, and the two of them lost their lives. The witch blamed the townspeople, saying it would never have happened if we'd listened in the first place and cooperated. Now she holds a grudge against us."

He shook his head. "It's true what they did was reckless, but if even one person who knew the mines well enough had gone with them, they might have survived. The people here feel pretty guilty over what happened. That's why none of them want to talk about the witch or get involved with her."

"But you're involved with her, aren't you?" said Prince Irvin.

The innkeeper smiled bitterly. "I lost my son in the first outbreak sixteen years ago. The witch's daughter and her husband did a lot for me back then. That's also part of why I'm looking after Gene, to pay them back."

In other words, Gene was the child they had left behind.

"Guess you're a softy, huh?" Prince Irvin teased.

I ignored his ribbing, more interested in the big revelations that were wrapped up in the innkeeper's explanation. "If I may...are any of them healers? Either the witch or the couple who passed away?"

"Yeah." The innkeeper frowned. "That witch has been working as a healer ever since she came to this town. Seems like her daughter had a bit of knowledge too, but that wasn't her main job. The daughter's husband was some kind of professor. A geologist, I think it was."

He sighed. "That witch was obstinate and hateful from the moment she arrived, but after her daughter and son-in-law passed, it only got worse. If you're hoping for her help with the outbreak, you'd

better look elsewhere.”

I’d mentioned before that I’d learned a lot about the Ashen Nightmare. He probably assumed (and rightly so) that I was looking for the witch because I wanted more information on the plague.

This was our only lead—a sliver of light in the darkness.

“Won’t you please guide us to the witch’s house?” I asked him.



Dark clouds loomed above, threatening to pour more snow down on us.

The innkeeper sensed my determination and put us in contact with a guide who made regular trips to the witch’s residence. As eager as I was to follow the lead we’d been given, his story made it clear this woman was nothing if not cantankerous. The hour was already late, and it would take us a while to make it there. So I swallowed back my impatience and decided to wait until the next morning.

We met our guide the following day. They were in their forties and rather taciturn. I was left utterly confused at first when they handed us a bunch of tools for shoveling snow, but I soon discovered their reasoning. Or rather, Jean and Prince Irvin did, since they were the ones doing all of the work.

Although there was a path leading to the witch’s house, which our guide frequently traveled on, there were too few people who used it. When it snowed, the trail was soon covered up without a trace.

As we took an early lunch break, my heart weighed heavy. Hearing about the witch’s hatred for people had been one thing, but I hadn’t really understood the depth of her feelings. I had a new perspective now that I’d seen how lonely and desolate this mountain she called home was.

“Seems like we’re getting even farther and farther into the mountains where there aren’t any people around,” Lord Alan remarked with a smile. He was munching away on a thick cut of meat slapped between two slices of toasted bread. It was wrapped in wax paper to keep his hands clean. “Wasn’t there a folk story you read about a traveler wandering deep into the mountains? They got lost and couldn’t find their way out, right?”

I tilted my head. “It wasn’t a folk story. It was a myth. A young boy—a priest-in-training—went deep into the mountains, where he eventually arrived at an old crone’s house. However, the crone was possessed by a man-eating demon. The boy used three holy relics in his attempt to escape her. The first one mimicked his voice, talking to her to keep her preoccupied. The second one acted as his double, misleading her as he fled. The third took his place when she tried to eat him.”

After a pause, I continued, "However, the crone realized she was being tricked and continued her chase. Her hair was a disheveled mess as she stalked after him, brandishing an enormous butcher's knife, her mouth cut open at the sides so she could better open her jaw to swallow the boy whole. Just as she was a hair's breadth from catching up to him..."

Everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting for me to continue, but I was interrupted when some nearby bushes began to rustle. Caught off guard, everyone jolted in surprise. Mabel quickly guided me away while Prince Irvin's hand hovered over the hilt of his sword. They were all on high alert.

"We sure it's not a bear or somethin'?"

Jean, bears hibernate in the winter.

As we all trained our eyes on the shaking bush, a wild rabbit jumped out. A winter rabbit, I assumed. It leaped into another bush almost as soon as it appeared, as if scrambling to get away from something. A child darted out from the undergrowth behind it. It was a boy, to be precise. His chestnut-colored hair extended down to his chin, his face stuck in an unfriendly scowl.

The boy's eyes widened upon seeing how large our group was. You didn't often see so many people this deep in the mountains. Recognition dawned on his face when he recognized the guide and myself. He remained silent as he studied us suspiciously.

"Ah, there you are, little one." Prince Irvin dropped his hand from the sword at his hip and tried to soften the atmosphere. "Gene, was it? Perfect timing. We actually came out here to meet your grandma. She lives out here, right?"

Since Lord Gene was already wary of us, Prince Irvin's casual approach likely only heightened his mistrust of us. He briefly traded glances with our guide, seeming to silently communicate with them before he heaved a sigh. For as much as everyone claimed I was distant and cold for not showing any emotion on my face, Lord Gene and this guide made me look welcoming and warm.

"You bring a gift?"

"Huh?" I blurted back.

Lord Gene sneered. "You're telling me you came to visit our house empty-handed?"

"Oh dear..." I awkwardly glanced around at the other members of my group. We were so focused on following this lead that we'd neglected basic etiquette.

Prince Irvin stared at the boy for a moment before saying, "You make a good point." He seemed impressed by how guarded Lord Gene was. "We'll help you out on your hunt and bring back something to give your grandma, then." He pulled Jean along with him.

“Why do I gotta go with you?” grumbled my manservant.

“Because you’d piss and moan if I sent you by yourself. I’m being nice and going with you.”

Mabel furrowed her brows. “Both of our armed escorts are going?”

“If it’s only for a little bit, we should be fine,” Lord Alan said, encouraging the other three to go.

Thus, Gene, Prince Irvin, and Jean went off to hunt. Those of us left behind had to continue shoveling the rest of the way to the witch’s residence. Not even twenty minutes passed before the snow started coming down heavy and the wind started whipping around us. The flakes were large and hard enough that they were pelting us like little stones.

“We have to get out of this quickly,” said our guide, who had mostly been silent up until this point. They gave up on the shoveling, instead ushering us along through the drifts.

My horse brayed, nervous as we trudged through the deep and unsteady snow. We managed to coax it along, but visibility was getting worse and worse. It was a grim reminder of how terrifying the weather could be when you ventured out into the wilderness. Worse yet when you were up north where the winters were harsh. Thankfully, we soon reached the witch’s house.

The instant relief and exhaustion I felt as we arrived echoed that of the traveler from the myth. On the advice of our guide, we tied up the horse in a small lean-to outside. We were covered head to toe in snow as we wandered up to the front door. After dusting the worst of it off, we entered.

“Gene, that you?”

Light spilled out from under a door, which swung open as an old woman peered out. It seemed she was in the middle of working when we entered.

Mabel and Rei sharply swallowed their breath, and Lord Alan’s mumbling seemed to sum up what they were all thinking. “Are we sure she’s not a man-eating witch instead of a man-hating one?”

She carried a butcher’s knife coated in red liquid, which gleamed in the light. Blood was splattered all across her apron, too. For a moment, I felt as if I’d been transported into the old legend.

The witch was about the same age as Chief Herbalist Nigel. She had scraggly white hair, left wild and free as if she had no regard for her personal appearance. There were harsh lines chiseled into her face from years of hardship, and her eyes were hardened with hostility and cynicism.

Almost as soon as she spotted us, she snapped, “What do you think you’re doing, entering someone else’s home without permission? Out! Out with you all!”

I panicked, not expecting the first words out of her mouth to be a complete dismissal.

Our guide approached and tried to explain the situation, but she cut them off. “Your excuses are wasted on me. I don’t care if you want shelter from the blizzard or if you came here to chat. I’ll not have any of it. Off with you now!” She spun around, intending to head back to her room.

Mabel and Lord Alan fumbled, trying to call after her. I meant to do the same but paused. The letter I’d tucked into my shirt seemed to call out to me: *I know you can do this, Eli.*

“Please wait.” Before Lord Alan or Mabel could stop me, I yanked the cloth off my head. There was no fooling the man-hating witch. If I had any chance of communicating with her, I had to do it as Elianna. “Healer of the mountains, I am Elianna Bernstein. Won’t you please hear what I have to say?”

The old woman peered back, her eyes swimming with uncertainty.

The witch guided us into her room, where a familiar sight awaited. There were all kinds of herbs and animal parts that could be used for medical purposes. Some were strewn up to dry, casting shadows on the floor. A cabinet was loaded full of all kinds of jars, some filled with bugs, eyeballs, or other unsightly things. It was like something straight out of a horror book.

An eerie smoke drifted up from a pot on the stove. Accompanying it was a cloying stench that would make anyone unaccustomed to such things turn around and leave immediately.

Lord Alan had experienced this before, and Mabel was no stranger to it either. They entered the room without hesitation. Rei, on the other hand, hesitated and mumbled to himself, “It looks like a witch’s workshop.”

Our guide excused themselves, saying they would go look for Lord Gene and the others. I was concerned for them as well, but I couldn’t let this opportunity slip by.

I turned my attention to the witch. On her work bench was a half-dissected snake. Most likely she’d managed to snag it during its brumation—a lethargic state reptiles entered during the cold that resembled hibernation.

“I guess those stories about witches drinking the lifeblood of snakes is true,” Rei whispered.

I shook my head. “A snake’s gallbladder has a number of medicinal effects. It can be a fever reducer or a cough suppressant. Chief Herbalist Nigel also told me it can be good for the stomach and heart. I assume someone must be ill for you to need something like this?”

The old woman snorted, stabbing her butcher's knife into the table before turning to face me. "No need to talk about me. What have you come here for? You're the prince's betrothed. Why trek all the way into these mountains to see me?"

I figured she would know who I was once I stated my name. There was enmity in her eyes, and the air in the room was thick enough I knew an ordinary approach wouldn't suffice. I decided to cut to the chase; lip service would be wasted on her. When I heard the story of the man-hating witch the night before, I had a suspicion about something.

"I heard your daughter and her husband claimed that Mt. Urma's mines were the cause of the plague. If you have a collection of their research notes or some kind of treatise—anything at all—would you let me see it?"

"What?" Mabel blurted out in disbelief, peering over at me.

Our original objective was Dr. Furness's research notes, which we hoped would lead us to a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. However, hearing what the innkeeper said, I believed there was another potential clue we could follow here.

The plague began with cold-like symptoms. People used those symptoms as a basis for their research. However, Chief Herbalist Nigel disagreed with that approach. He thought the Ashen Nightmare was completely different from a cold, and he tried to develop a cure for it by approaching the disease from a different angle. That was what led him to create the medicine we had now for suppressing the symptoms. He and the other researchers had identified how the Ashen Nightmare was unique from other afflictions, but they hadn't discovered where the sickness originated.

Sixteen years ago, the Ashen Nightmare spread throughout the land, but because it so resembled that of an ordinary cold, it was difficult for anyone to pinpoint where or what it originally came from. Discovering the origin of the plague would be a monumental discovery. It would also give us a solid lead on how to eradicate this vicious disease altogether.

When I explained as much, the witch's face filled with emotion. "What makes you think my son-in-law's notes would have any merit?" She studied me, waiting for a response like a professor testing their pupil.

I sucked in a breath. My reasoning was based on the knowledge I'd gained from my reading as well as educated guesses from the researchers I'd been involved with. "Part of what destroyed the Kai Arg Empire so long ago was an illness that had cold-like symptoms and a high fever. Many people died from it."

Although similar to the epidemic we were currently facing, this

ancient disease didn't have the Ashen Nightmare's characteristic symptom of darkened skin. There was little evidence to connect the two as a result. However, there were some researchers who proposed the two were similar because of the way they spread and the high mortality rate. I had recently read a text that supported this analysis. There was still no substantial proof to link the Ashen Nightmare to the disease that plagued the empire, but I was certain they were related.

"There was an entry in the book *A Record of the Downfall of the Kai Arg Empire - Astrologian's Edition*. It said, 'The comet of ill omen fell. I followed its path to a village, where not a single survivor could be found. They all fell asleep long ago and not a single one of them ever opened their eyes again.'"

Behind me, Mabel gasped. "You mean..."

I quietly peered at the witch.

Oracles, referred to as astrologians in the ancient Kai Arg Empire, were akin to the modern-day astrologer. There was once a time when their power eclipsed that of the emperor. However, due to political upheaval, they lost their special status. As the sands of time flowed on, people's belief in oracles faltered. They soon became little more than legend. When they were still at the height of their power, they collected their vast knowledge into a tome and passed it on to future generations. Though the text itself invited much skepticism from others, researchers considered its contents valuable.

I had received one of these rare volumes before from the prince, where I discovered symptoms of a disease closely resembling the Ashen Nightmare. People fell asleep, never to awaken again.

"That village I mentioned was a mining village, one that was abandoned when the mines dried up," I said. "There are numerous similarities between what we're facing now and what they faced then. That plague swept across their lands. Oracles left notes about its symptoms, which sound much like ours. And there was a mention of mines. The only difference is that people's skin didn't turn black, but the sickness originally broke out along the foot of the northern mountain range on their border. This time, most of the casualties are coming from Maldura."

Rei gulped. He must have sensed what I was hinting at.

I stared straight into the old woman's eyes as I said, "Maldura recently discovered a new mineral. There is a good chance *that* is the source of the spread this time—either the mineral itself or the mines."

"But," Mabel and Rei spoke up in protest at the same time. After an awkward pause, Mabel continued. "Sixteen years ago when it began its spread in Sauslind, there was no talk of a new mineral or anything like that here. Nor has there been any such discovery this time as it once again sweeps across our lands. Though I do see your

point about the similarities.”

I nodded and bit my bottom lip. What I was saying was mere conjecture at this point. However, now I knew there was someone else who had claimed the mines were the source of the illness. If I could only see their notes, maybe I could find some clues that would lead us to a better answer. I was staking my hopes on that.

The old woman snorted as she plopped herself down in a nearby chair. “Just as humans evolve, so do illnesses.” She sighed, her breath coming out as a strangled exhale.

Concerned, I opened my mouth to inquire about her health, but she cut me off before I could get my question out.

“Every living thing is the prey of something else. Doesn’t matter where you look, that’s the case everywhere. Illnesses are alive, too, and they’re desperately trying to survive.”

“Should I take that to mean you *do* think the Ashen Nightmare originated from the mines?” Rei asked.

“Good question. My son-in-law talked a lot about the geological features of the mountain, and how snowfall interacts with the atmosphere deep in the mines. But I’m not a specialist in that field, so I can’t give you all of the details. More importantly, is that really what you came here for?” Her eyes bore into me.

“No,” I answered nervously. “I came here to borrow the research notes Chief Herbalist Nigel’s master, Dr. Furness, left behind. We suspect that it may contain clues for concocting a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. That it may be a real-life Furya’s Jar.”

Mabel and the others glanced over at me, frowns on their faces. They were hesitant to disclose this much information. While it might mean finding the hints we were seeking, there was no way of knowing for certain whether this woman was actually related to Dr. Furness or not.

Silence filled the air as the old woman scrutinized me. She finally snorted again and said, “Nigel, huh? That’s a name I haven’t heard in a while. Guess that weird old fart hasn’t kicked the bucket yet, then.”

“Hmm,” Lord Alan drawled from behind me, mumbling to himself. “I feel like Nigel could say the same to her.”

Mabel was clutching at her chest, eyes full of hope. I, too, clasped my hands as if in prayer and asked, “I assume you are related to Dr. Furness then?”

The old woman scoffed. She looked at us now with the same animosity she’d exhibited when we first arrived. “And what of it? You’ve tacked quite the fancy name onto those notes. Furya’s Jar, hmph. Did you think brownnosing would be enough to convince *me* to help someone from the royal family, Miss Future-Crown-Princess?”

I swallowed hard. There was no doubt now that she was related to

Dr. Furness, but since I was the crown prince's betrothed, she likely wouldn't part with his notes easily. After all—

"The royal family killed my son. Why, after all this time, do you think I would agree to help you?"

Mabel jumped in surprise.

This was why the royal family couldn't search for this woman openly. Twenty years ago, her son was arrested as the mastermind behind a failed attempt to poison the king. The boy in question was seen as a prodigy in the Royal Pharmacy, with a bright future ahead of him. His skills were rumored to surpass even those of Chief Herbalist Nigel. Unfortunately, he lost his way and was executed.

I clenched my fist tight.

Public records listed it as a horrific incident that occurred during the king's ascension to the throne, but close family members of the accused refused to believe the official story. They considered it murder, not execution. Judging by what I'd heard from Duchess Rosalia, the young healer probably got caught up in the political infighting at the palace and was used as a scapegoat.

The witch seemed to see right through me, her tone taking a harsh edge as she spat, "You royal folk only think about yourselves. You pinned all the blame on my son and killed him, just so you could clean up the incident and put a pretty bow on it. My entire family was ostracized after that. We lost our house and our jobs. My husband was so consumed by grief that he soon followed my son to the grave. Two decades have passed since and now here you come, wanting my help—wanting my family's research because sickness is spreading throughout the country. Are we nobles nothing more than pawns to the Sauslind royal family?"

I gritted my teeth, unable to respond. My heart ached the moment I heard of the incident, but that was because I knew Chief Herbalist Nigel, His Majesty, and Duchess Rosalia personally. I never thought of the hardships the executed man's family might face in the aftermath. Worse, I was connected to the royal family and I'd just waltzed right in here asking for help without regard to her feelings. It was only natural for her to resent us.

I continued chewing on my lip.

The old woman sighed, her anger and indignation fading. She huffed and said, "I have no intention of helping either Sauslind or its royal family. Now, get out of my house."

"But...!"

We needed this lead. There were people out there suffering. Everyone was consumed by the fear that they might be next. Moreover, a cure was our only hope of stopping a potential war with Maldura. Chief Herbalist Nigel, his team, and the doctors at the

treatment center were no doubt pouring their blood, sweat, and tears into trying to develop a cure. I wanted Dr. Furness's research notes so we could help them. Books weren't the most valuable thing in the world. I understood that. However, *this* book could give us a clue we desperately needed.

"I beg you to reconsider," I said with all sincerity.

The tone of her voice shifted. "Well, I suppose if you're that set on it, I could consider lending his notes to you."

"Really?" I blurted, filled with surprise and delight.

The woman quietly fixed her eyes on me. The next words that came out of her mouth struck me speechless, causing my whole body to freeze in place.

"That is, if you agree to step down from your position as the crown prince's fiancée, Elianna Bernstein."

~.~.~.~

Tension hung thick in the air, at least until someone clapped their hands together and broke it.

"Not happening!"

Their voice was cheerful, a strong contrast to the solemn atmosphere in the room.

I blinked several times. Even the old woman looked baffled as she turned her attention to the person who had interrupted us. Behind me, our court musician was dressed as an ordinary servant.

"C'mon, you could turn the heavens upside down and we still couldn't honor that request. Or do you want the Demon Lo—I mean, Prince Chris—to strangle me in my sleep?"

...Pardon?

Relieved at the light and airy turn the conversation had taken, I glanced at Lord Alan. He had a grin like a Cheshire cat's stretched across his face.

"The people of Sauslind need someone like Lady Elianna. Asking her to step down from her position is out of the question," he said firmly. "I understand why you hold a grudge against the country and the royal family, Miss Man-hating Witch. But do you really intend to prioritize your individual feelings over the possibility that those notes might provide a way for us to save hundreds or thousands of lives? Aren't you a healer? Didn't you choose this path because you wanted to save those afflicted by injury or illness?"

The old woman's face puckered. Clearly, he'd hit a sore spot.

"Lady healer, it pains me deeply as a citizen of Sauslind to hear of the grief and loss you have suffered, but please..." Mabel took a knee as she pleaded with the witch. "I implore you to lend your wisdom to Lady Elianna. I am certain she will use it to save many people. She is,

after all, the Bibliophile Princess. She is neither the type to sniff her nose at the knowledge of our forebears nor to trample the hard work they poured into advancing the field of medicine.”

The way she entreated the old woman made my heart squeeze. The nickname “Bibliophile Princess” didn’t generally have good connotations. Since the prince often called me that affectionately, I’d gradually started to accept it. There was still a part of me that felt a bit uncomfortable with it, but even other people were using it as a term of endearment. If they wanted to refer to me as a bibliophile and protector of ancient knowledge, then I considered that the highest praise.

As I trembled with emotion, the old woman scoffed. “I guess you Bernsteins are no different from the royal family.” Resentment oozed from her voice.

Lord Alan cut in, “Um, Miss Witch... Actually, I haven’t even asked for your name yet. How rude of me. What should we call you?”

I flushed with shame. No matter how impatient I was to get my hands on Dr. Furness’s research materials, it was still inconsiderate of me not to ask the woman for her name.

“Hmph,” said the old woman. “I’m Hester Vassos.”

“What?!” I squeaked.

Hester Vassos was the author of such books as *How to Distinguish Edible Grasses*, *A Household Encyclopedia of Medicinal Herbs*, and *What Are the Plants We Call Wild Grass?* There were countless other texts as well, all on medicinal herbs. The explanation I gave the other day about Kenneth’s Herb was also based on a book she wrote.

Given the state of affairs in her day and age, having the same knowledge as the men in a field wasn’t enough for a woman to be recognized. Dr. Hester must have put in two or three times the work of her peers, clawing and biting her way up. She also managed to dissect the knowledge she had gained into simple layman’s terms so even the women in rural villages and the poor sections of the capital could read and understand her works. By recording decades of dietary knowledge that women had passed down through generations, she also gave many in the academic field a new respect for the fairer sex.

It was a different scholar who first discovered Kenneth’s Herb, but the one who came up with solid proof of the herb’s effects was some unknown housewife. Hester Vassos was the one who recorded that woman’s wisdom.

“You’re her?” My voice cracked as I asked.

The old woman grunted in the most unladylike way, turning the other cheek at me. “And so what if I am?”

This was unbelievable.

This woman is absolutely amazing!

My impressions of her changed completely as my heart trembled with admiration. I mumbled something without even thinking. My voice was barely above a whisper, but it was still loud enough that everyone turned their gaze on me, stunned with disbelief at what I was saying. I paid them no heed, clutching my hands over my chest as I sucked in a breath and repeated the words again, louder this time.

“Can I please have your autograph?”

Silence fell. As it stretched on, I thought, *Oh dear, maybe I’ve made a bit of a mistake.*

Rei was giving me a chilly look, but he wasn’t the only one; Mabel’s disapproving gaze was boring into me too.

Lord Alan quietly snickered to himself.

I cleared my throat. This obviously wasn’t the time or place for this.

Dr. Hester grunted again, although this time there was a bit of a smile on her face. “Honestly, you Bernsteins really are something else.” She heaved herself out of the chair in an exaggerated motion, waddling over to a nearby bookshelf that was loaded with medicinal herbs. From it, she produced a single book. “My father, Furness, was an intense male chauvinist.”

“What?” I stared back at her, doubting my ears for a moment.

Her lips twisted with irony. “Let me guess. You figured the research journal hailed as Furry’s Jar had to be written by a man of moral and upstanding character, right? But a researcher’s ability and their disposition are entirely unrelated.” She ventured back over to her chair, heaved a sigh, and sank back down into it.

Again, I wanted to ask after her health since she seemed to be struggling, but those scrutinizing eyes of hers silenced me before I could get the words out.

“My father took Nigel and other male apprentices, but he refused to teach me or any of the other girls how to read or write a single letter. He said, ‘A woman’s place is in the home,’ and, ‘Your job is to get married and have kids.’ It didn’t matter how much I insisted I wanted to learn about herbalism. He wouldn’t give me the time of day. That’s why I ran away from home and went off to find somewhere I could study it on my own. But...”

But the world was unforgiving. It was common for nobles to learn reading and writing, but even if a commoner received such education, it would require an immense amount of money to pursue a specialty in any field, as well as support from their family. The literacy rate among the common people was currently climbing, but for those in remote villages where conditions were harsh, work was more essential than learning.

The conditions were even worse for Dr. Hester’s generation, since

war periodically broke out and the political climate was unstable. I couldn't even imagine how difficult that must have made it for a woman like her to find somewhere she could learn.

However, Dr. Hester merely huffed, as if dismissing my concern. "Incidentally," she said, her face softening, "I eventually found myself in a place that was, well, odd. All the children and the adults there could read, and all of the valuable books you could imagine were kept in this magnificent library where anyone could go and learn. The rulers of that region even collected all my notes together and made them into a book. They...really were a strange bunch of nobles. I'm talking about your father and grandfather, by the way, Miss Bernstein."

I almost gaped at her and had to use my hand to keep my jaw from dropping.

"Ah, now it all makes sense," Lord Alan remarked. "That's why it upset you to hear that Lady Elianna got engaged to the prince. You owe their family a debt of gratitude, and yet their only daughter is marrying into the royal family which you despise. I get now why you wanted them to separate."

The old woman gave a heavy, irritable sigh as she gazed down at the book in her lap, deep in thought. "My father never recognized what I accomplished, not even on his deathbed. I know firsthand how toxic such bigotry can be. That's why..." She held the book out to me. Her eyes were full of emotion, as if she were silently saying she wouldn't repeat the same mistake as her father. "I wouldn't willingly hand this thing over to the prince's betrothed, but I don't mind handing it over to the Bibliophile Princess. I look forward to seeing whether you can make any use of it." Her lips finally broke into a smile.

My hands trembled as I reached out to accept it from her. The fact that she had entrusted something like this to me indicated she was acknowledging me. That warmed my heart.

"Thank you, Dr. Hester."

At last, I had my hands on Furry's Jar. This put us one step closer to finding a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. And with it, we could save people from their suffering and put a stop to the potential war looming over us. Joy and hope welled up inside of me as I hugged the text close to my chest.

Dr. Hester's cheeks colored as she huffed, pointing toward the door to a different room. "You'll find my son-in-law's research notes and materials in there. Dig through them at your leisure."

"We'll definitely do that, thank you," I said.

Mabel and the others were grinning alongside me.

As if to distract from all the sentimentality, Dr. Hester suddenly

said, "Gene sure is late." Then she froze, taking several shallow breaths in quick succession.

"Are you all right?" I asked, anxiety mounting.

Dr. Hester clutched at her chest and her face contorted in agony. "That medicine, over there," she said, motioning with her finger.

Mabel hurriedly grabbed it, pausing briefly to take a sniff. Realization dawned on her face. "Do you have heart problems?"

The old woman struggled to swallow the liquid contained within the vial, taking sharp, raspy breaths.

"Come, we need to get you somewhere you can lie down," said Mabel.

Dr. Hester pulled a face but reluctantly complied. She leaned on Mabel for support as she headed for her bedroom. Concerned, I followed close behind. Mabel quickly instructed Lord Alan to fetch some warm water. Rei silently stalked off to the room where all the geological notes were kept.

Once we got Dr. Hester into her bed, Mabel gave several more instructions which had us racing around to fetch things. It was in the midst of this that I caught a whiff of smoke, as if something were burning. I immediately headed toward the source. Rei must have smelled it too, because he came darting out of the room he was in. When we opened the door to the room where all the herbs were stored, what awaited us made me gasp.

"What is..."

Red flames were swallowing up the interior. Even Rei was at a loss for words. The fire snapped and crackled, sparks dancing through the air. In the middle of it all stood a silhouette, holding Furya's Jar, which I had left in my haste to look after Dr. Hester.

I couldn't comprehend what was happening. All I could do was call their name.

"Jean...?"

Chapter 8: The Dream Is Over

As the crown prince of Sauslind, I was being bombarded with numerous meetings and reports from all over the country about the number of infected. Most of my hours were spent giving out orders and watching over the military like a hawk. By the time I returned to my office, the sun was already setting.

My hands were full enough setting up countermeasures for dealing with the plague, but that wasn't the only matter that needed attending to; there were other political issues going on all across our regions that couldn't be ignored. The prime minister could approve most matters, but the final decision had to go through me.

It was little wonder I felt no inclination to head straight to my work desk. Instead, I opted for plopping myself down onto the sofa in the corner of the room, near where Elianna always sat. Since no one else was in sight, I allowed myself to breathe out a deep sigh, draping an arm over my face. After a few restful minutes, I spoke up, directing a question to one of my Shadows.

"Has there been any report from Alan?"

This bodyguard normally never showed any emotion, but he hesitated a moment before answering this time. "Nothing yet." His voice betrayed nothing, but there was something unusual about his response.

I could sense what it was already. Something strange was going on with my Shadows.

I sighed again, clenching my fist tight as I remembered the initial report I received. "*We haven't been able to confirm whether Lady Elianna Bernstein survived the attack or not.*"

I knew when I sent her far away that no matter how much preparation I made, there was a possibility the unforeseen might happen. People had advised me before to trust the men I chose to serve me, but already a man I had once considered a friend—a man I'd placed my faith in—had betrayed me. It didn't matter what the circumstances were, that someone might have forced Ian into it. The facts were the facts. And now, something strange was going on with the very bodyguards I had assigned to protect Eli as a last line of defense.

I ground my teeth. Unfiltered rage oozed out of me, stifling the air. Even the Shadows, who remained hidden, flinched at the shift.

As soon as I heard that the Ashen Nightmare was resurfacing, I accounted for every worst-case scenario I could think of as I gathered clues and entrusted them to Elianna. Unfortunately, someone else was getting the exact same information we had. They wouldn't overlook Elianna, especially since she was trying to search for a cure.

Ever since I got word that she was missing, a restlessness began to overtake me from the inside. I believed she was still alive. I knew some would try to target her the moment she left the palace, and that was why I gave the order to hide her identity and leak it to no one if the worst should come to pass.

I knew I was placing her in danger. That was why I simulated everything in my head and put countermeasures in place. I even sent her with some of the royal family's Shadows—bodyguards of the highest caliber. So why was something strange happening in their midst?!

Normally I hid my bitterness and fury behind a stone facade, but the exhaustion had sapped me of the strength to do so. It spilled out of me like a poison when I thought about how there were people out there who might have hurt Elianna.

If anything should happen to her...

As my thoughts began to turn pitch black, a knock suddenly sounded at the door with all too perfect timing. The person didn't even bother waiting for a reply; they barged in and heaved an exasperated sigh at me.

"I thought I told you to go lie down."

It was Glen, who had been by my side almost constantly without bothering to change shifts with anyone. In the absence of Alexei's persistent nagging, he was doing an admirable job of fulfilling the annoying sister-in-law role, snipping at me constantly about one ridiculous thing or another.

My dark thoughts began to lift as I drew a long breath. A familiar scent tickled my nose, a special nutrient brew that my longtime chamberlain had concocted. I lifted the arm from my face and sat up straight, reaching for the steaming cup.

"It's awful," I choked out after taking a small drink.

Glen groused, "Give me a break."

The chamberlain shrugged, accustomed to my complaints.

"I remember you drinking a whole cup of that insanely bitter black tea Lady Elianna made for you before. It was so disgusting that Alex and I couldn't taste anything else for the rest of the day," said Glen.

I sighed at his resentful grumbling. "Glen, when the woman you love makes something for you herself, it tastes even better than the most heavenly wine. You just don't understand because you haven't

experienced it yet.”

Taken aback, he pressed a hand to his chest. “You might actually have a point.”

My more realistic chamberlain merely shook his head and said, “I don’t think it matters how much you love the person. She put in ten times the amount she should for a single pot of tea. Anyone would agree it was disgusting.”

Right as their banter was beginning to liven my spirits...

“Please halt,” said a guard outside.

Only a few seconds later, the door burst open. This wasn’t something I minded from one of my inner circle, but this intruder was far from being an ally.

“Pardon me for interrupting your pleasant little discussion here, Prince Christopher.”

The man shamelessly strode in despite his apology. His hair was the same dark reddish-brown as his eyes. At first glance, his features greatly resembled my mother’s, but there was a telling difference: his lips were pulled taut and his eyes were narrowed as if he was scrutinizing everyone and everything, himself included. As the older brother of the queen, which also made him my uncle, Greig Odin was the most prominent noble in all of Sauslind.

His brazen audacity prompted a complaint from my chamberlain, who said, “How dare you barge into His Highness’s office like this.” My uncle’s intimidating stare quickly silenced him, however.

“I’m afraid if I didn’t, there would be no other opportunity for me to seek an audience with His Highness. You’ll have to excuse me for being too forward.” He smiled apologetically, but there was no shame in his voice.

While Uncle Theodore was often casual and discourteous with me, there was a certain familial affection to his actions. This was entirely different. Uncle Greig came in with the commanding presence of an eminent noble, exuding a pressure that silenced those beneath him. He didn’t even have to say anything to chase my chamberlain out the door. Glen remained, but my uncle didn’t even spare a glance his way.

I held back the impulse to click my tongue at him as I remained seated, fixing our intruder with a cool gaze. “I am most humbled that someone as busy as yourself would take the time to come all the way to my office, Uncle. If this is an urgent matter, however, shouldn’t you have shared it during our meeting a little while ago, where we could have all discussed it?”

During these repeated meetings, my uncle said only the bare minimum. He never brought up any topics for discussion. The ones who spoke loudest in his faction were those at the bottom. That made his objective all the more obvious. He wanted to drive me into a

corner and use Elianna's safety as bait to lure me into proposing a deal with him. That was likely what he'd been waiting for, biding his time until I came groveling. Sadly, as he should have known from the beginning, I wasn't quite so obedient.

When I was younger, he offered numerous times to grant me safe shelter from the previous queen's faction. I need only agree to marry his daughter or the princess of the Miseral Dukedom, to whom he was distantly related. Given the delicate balance of power between the nobles and the political environment at the time, my father rebuffed him. I began snuffing out such engagement talks before they ever saw the light of day, once I was old enough to do so. After all, I'd already met Elianna by that time.

My uncle was surely infuriated that I wouldn't bend to his will. I always greeted him with a smile on my face, but this power struggle had been going on between us for years. Even as he boldly claimed a seat without my invitation, he kept a mask on his face, not betraying any emotion. The way he conducted himself might lead one to believe this was his room, not mine. I could at least begrudgingly respect his boldness.

"It's something I thought too delicate to discuss with the other cabinet members, Your Highness." He smiled haughtily, as if expecting me to be grateful for his consideration.

As I reflexively returned his smile, I realized that my uncle had, inadvertently, played a large role in shaping me into the man I was.

"If it's too delicate to bring up in front of the others, it sounds quite serious. I'm afraid I haven't the faintest clue what you could be hinting at. Is there something you want to confide in me?" I asked.

Not only was he the regional lord controlling Kelk Harbor, the western gateway into Sauslind, my uncle also had deep ties with the Miseral Dukedom, making him an expert on open sea trade. I had been keeping somewhat of an eye on oversea trade since the incident at the Autumn Hunting Festival. It was clear someone didn't think fondly of us developing diplomatic ties with Maldura and had no compunction about taking action to ensure we failed.

There was also movement in the Miseral Dukedom, primarily in relation to sea trade. That was where my search collided with former princess Mireille's, who was looking into the accidental death of her husband. The two of us managed to swap information before the end of the year, and every lead I followed since brought me to one person: Uncle Greig. I knew he wouldn't go down easily.

After a brief pause, my uncle nodded. "Of course, as I mentioned, this is a delicate matter. I would like to keep it confidential."

I furrowed my brows and began to clench my fists as he continued.

“Prince Christopher, allow me to say how proud I am that you have decided to fulfill your duty *this time* during our country’s hour of need. Especially since, ah, ‘unfortunate news’ has made its way to you.”

His malice was clear by the way he emphasized “this time.” No doubt he was referring to last autumn when I cut my duties short to save Elianna from danger. That wasn’t an option for me this time, since the king was unconscious and I was temporarily taking his place. No matter how much I might want to ride out and confirm her safety for myself, my hands were tied. Calling the report about Elianna being missing “unfortunate news” was just his way of trying to get under my skin.

Glen wore his emotions on his sleeve, scowling at my uncle. As for me, I shot an icy glare his way.

There was only one person who would target her and take action without hesitation.

Even as my anger began to spill out, my uncle remained composed. He spoke as if he had complete faith in his view of the world, as if him being incorrect was unthinkable.

“However, Your Highness, there is an even greater duty you owe the kingdom right now. One I’m afraid you have neglected.” As I drew my brows, he mumbled under his breath just loud enough for me to hear, “Or rather I suppose you have purposefully overlooked it.”

“I fear I don’t understand what you’re alluding to, Uncle.”

“Prince Christopher...” He spoke in a voice that would brook no dissent; not because he was trying to give me the “tough love” one might expect from family, but because he was needling me to obey.

Now that I thought about it, Uncle Odin always spoke to me using “Your Highness” or “Prince Christopher.” Never did he use an affectionate nickname for me as Uncle Theodore did. Even if I hadn’t already guessed what he was about to say, the false politeness he used when speaking my name was a telltale sign.

“Now that His Majesty has fallen ill, the royal family’s survival is at stake. You’re the only direct descendant right now. As the crown prince and a member of the royal family, it’s your duty to see that your royal blood continues. Or am I mistaken?”

My blood immediately ran cold. So he was behind all those rumors on the streets.

The door abruptly cracked open, as if whomever was entering had consulted my uncle and timed their entrance to match his words. It was a woman, dressed not in the normal florid dresses she wore in the afternoon or the plainclothes she wore downtown, but an evening gown that accentuated her feminine silhouette.

My cousin, Pharmia Odin, had the same dark reddish-brown hair

as her father, but those hazel eyes that were normally so quiet and modest now filled with determination. She looked straight at me, face drawn tight with tension. As she spoke, she echoed the words of the prominent conservatives in Sauslind, who thought of the royal family foremost.

“Your Highness, it’s your duty to continue the royal line.”

~.~.~.~

At first, I wasn’t as suspicious of Jean as I should have been. I assumed he had returned with the others from the hunt, saw the fire, and immediately ran in to save my book for me.

As embers danced through the air, I started to hurry toward him, but Rei shot a hand out to stop me. I drew my brows at him, but as I followed Rei’s gaze, I spotted a figure on the floor cradling their arm.

“Lord Alan!”

With Rei holding me back, all I could do was watch.

Jean held the book in one hand, but in his other...

Why is he holding a knife? And why is it dripping with blood?

“Jean...?” I croaked out.



I expected him to reply the way he always did. To say, “M’lady, your precious book here was seconds away from turnin’ to ash.” But instead, he ignored me, tossing the text into the flames.

That book was all the research Dr. Furness had left behind about a cure for the Ashen Nightmare. No matter how terrible a person he might have been or what discord might have existed between him and Dr. Hester, he was still her father. That book was a culmination of his life’s work—Furya’s Jar.

I gaped, air whistling past my teeth in a silent cry.

Lord Alan also reached his hand toward it, but Jean’s blade whipped through the air, forcing him back.

“Jean,” Lord Alan choked out, face painted in despair and anger. “So, you *are* the traitor after all...”

The words passed right through my ears, as if my brain couldn’t comprehend their meaning. In the blink of an eye, the book turned to mere ash as the flames spread. The way they grew was unnatural, as if someone had sprinkled oil everywhere.

Jean’s eyes were colder than I had ever seen them before. He showed no mercy as he brought his blade down toward Lord Alan, freezing only when Mabel’s earsplitting scream reverberated through the house. There were other voices as well, calling for me. Somewhere, people were battling, steel clashing against steel.

Rei finally broke out of his paralysis and leaped through the flames, yanking his sword out before standing between Jean and Lord Alan. The two traded blows two or three times. When Rei stumbled because of the flames, Jean took the opportunity to put some distance between them.

I had always thought of Jean as tall and lanky, perpetually tired, and completely unmotivated. He always seemed to have a blank look on his face too, but right now, his eyes were sharper and more focused than I’d ever seen them. It was almost as if he were a different person. A person I didn’t recognize.

“Jean?” Despite everything I had seen, all I could do was numbly call his name like a fool.

He finally turned his gaze back toward me. His face was full of determination—a determination to part ways with me. His actions spoke loud enough on their own, but then he said, “The dream is over, m’lady.”

Jean slowly turned his blade toward me.

“Jean, stop it!” Lord Alan bellowed.

I stood there frozen as he drew closer and closer, until a beam fell from the ceiling, engulfed in flames.

“Rei, where are you?!” Prince Irvin called from somewhere in the

house.

“Over here!” Rei hollered back as he heaved Lord Alan up, helping him escape the fire raging around us.

My feet were rooted in place as I stared at Jean. He turned his back on me and disappeared, swallowed up by ember and smoke.

Although the building was beginning to crumble, Prince Irvin managed to slip in through the back and join us. “Rei, did something happen?!”

“The traitor showed himself. Looks like the princess’s manservant is on the enemy’s side. How did things go on your end?”

Prince Irvin clicked his tongue, scowling. “I thought something was up when I noticed him missing all of a sudden. We ran into some guys outside who were shooting flaming arrows at the house. They’ve already fled, though.”

“What about Mabel and the old woman?” Lord Alan asked.

“Already escorted them out of the house,” replied Prince Irvin. When he and Lord Alan realized I was zoning out, they both shouted over at me, ushering me to come along.

I could only stand there, eyes glued to the raging fire destroying everything in its path. Furya’s Jar was now nothing more than ash. Our hope of creating a cure for the Ashen Nightmare had been snuffed out with it. On top of that, Jean had cut ties with me, sided with the enemy, and even turned his sword on us.

The shock was so severe my mind went numb. The smoke and ash in the air stung my eyes as the flames drew closer, but my legs were stiff as board, unmoving.

“Hey, Bibliophile Princess!” Prince Irvin sent Lord Alan and Rei on ahead while he barked at me. But for all his urging, I remained there like a statue. “Elianna!”

I flinched when he grabbed my arm and dragged me toward him. His pitch-black eyes seemed to pierce right through me.

“Get a hold of yourself. It’s not over yet.”

The strength in his gaze was like a spark that brought me back to life. Finally, the paralysis subsided, and with it gone, the reality of the situation came rushing in at me. Smoke flooded my lungs, leaving me coughing and gagging.

Prince Irvin wrapped an arm over my head as he escorted me out of the burning building, shielding me from the falling embers. Somehow, we managed to escape with our lives.

By the time we made it out, the blizzard had stopped. I collapsed into the snow on my hands and knees. My throat felt like it was on fire at first, but as I took a gulp of the cold night air, the sudden change in temperature had me choking again.

“Lady Elianna!” Mabel rushed to my side and stroked my back.

Once I caught my breath, I assured her I was okay and asked after well-being. She was covered in soot and had a few light burns, but overall she was all right. Relief washed over me. At the edge of my vision, I noticed our guide standing there supporting Dr. Hester. Lord Gene was beside them. Rei was also nearby, doing some basic first aid to stop Lord Alan's wound from bleeding.

The people who had shot the flaming arrows at the house were long gone by now. As reassuring as it was that everyone had survived, there was a notable absence from our group. The shock of Jean's betrayal gripped my heart.

Snowflakes danced all around us as flames continued to consume the house. As much as we might want to combat the fire, it had already spread too far. All we could do now was watch as the building crumbled away.

Prince Irvin scooped up his thick mantle, which he must have discarded in the snow when he dashed inside the building, and draped it over my shoulders. "Let's go back to the town for now." His words finally prompted everyone to start moving, although the atmosphere that settled over us was bleak.

At the realization that all of our hard work had been for naught, exhaustion swept over me.



My horse fled during the fire, so we had no choice but to give up on it. The only remaining one we had was restless from all of the excitement. Once we were far enough away from the fire for it to settle down, we put Lord Alan and Dr. Hester on its back and made our way down the mountain.

By the time we returned to Hersche, the sun was already setting. Crowds of people were beginning to settle down at the dining tables inside our inn. The innkeeper was horrified by the state we were in, but his shock was twofold upon seeing that we'd brought the witch with us.

Prince Irvin gave him a brief explanation of what had happened. Expression grim, the man nodded and said he'd contact the village's militia about putting the fire out. He also promised to have someone check the mountain to make sure the damage didn't spread.

We carried Dr. Hester to a room and put her in bed. Lord Gene stayed close by her side while our guide disappeared to retrieve some medicine. The innkeeper allowed those of us who remained (except for the injured Lord Alan) to have first priority in using the steam baths.

Mabel was no less shocked than I was after I told her everything that had happened, but she was quick to compose herself and attend

to me. Despite having been through the same awful events, she displayed such courage that it left me in awe. Her attitude was encouraging. Although we had yet to solve anything, I reminded myself now wasn't the time to lose my nerve.

We washed the smoke and the soot from our bodies and enjoyed a small break before heading off to dinner. I managed to force some food down my throat even though I lacked any appetite. Once we were finished, Mabel and I headed to Dr. Hester's room to check in on how she was doing.

Lord Gene was there at the door to greet us. He was less friendly than I remembered, his eyes now suspicious and guarded. "She's asleep right now." He didn't say the words out loud, but his body language seemed to shout, *Stay away*.

Our visit to the old witch's house had put an even greater burden on her already weakened heart, and worse yet, she had lost her house in the process, too.

I sucked in a breath and lowered my head. On the way down from the mountain, Lord Alan finally explained what he'd kept hidden all this time: Prince Christopher suspected there was a traitor close to me leaking information to our enemies.

"We had no idea who it was. Prince Chris investigated everyone: Lady Lilia, Lady Therese, Duchess Rosalia, and even Alexei."

I swallowed hard. Lord Alexei Strasser was the prince's right-hand man, but His Highness had still investigated him. My chest tightened. This made me rethink everything. Lord Alexei was currently third in line for the throne. His Highness must have considered all kinds of possibilities, putting his personal feelings aside as he investigated and crossed off unlikely suspects. The crown demanded that kind of emotionless calculation.

Prince Irvin scoffed. "What, Court Musician, so he didn't even consider the possibility that *you* might be the culprit?" His tone was sarcastic, but he shot a sharp look at Lord Alan. The latter only gave a forced chuckle.

"Until Prince Chris picked me up off the streets, I was an orphan pickpocketing and thieving in one of Sauslind's port cities. Of course, he did have me thoroughly investigated before I started working for him. But I have no connection to the nobility, and I'm not like the royal family's Shadows, who were trained from a young age."

"The royal family's Shadows?" I mumbled.

Lord Alan promptly explained. The family's personal guard protected them in public, while another elite group called Shadows watched over them and did their bidding behind the scenes. When the prince couldn't be with me himself, he made sure some of his Shadows

were with me.

The first thing that came to mind when Lord Alan mentioned that was the Autumn Hunting Festival last year. I recalled someone darting out of the shadows to fight those thugs. The same had happened a few days ago when we were under attack. The name Shadows fit them perfectly.

“However,” Lord Alan continued, his voice growing grim, “something has been off with them lately. Messages from Prince Chris haven’t been coming through. And there were far fewer of them with us than there were supposed to be.”

“Hm, sounds about right.” Prince Irvin grunted. “When Lady Elianna’s carriage was attacked, we were following your group from a different path and saw some of it play out. The enemy orchestrated it so they could separate her from the Black Wing Knights, and when your prince’s Shadows rode in to help combat them, there weren’t very many of them.”

I took in a shaky breath, chest still tight with shock. Jean was one of the royal family’s Shadows. He’d been guarding me secretly all this time. So why had he betrayed me now? A heavy weight bore down on my heart.

Guilt flickered in Lord Alan’s eyes as he said, “If only I’d suspected him sooner.”

Lord Alan had been the one watching over me ever since I became engaged to the prince. In the process, he had a lot of interaction with Jean. It must have been difficult for him to suspect Jean after all the time they spent together. Especially since he tried to confront Jean and protect Dr. Furness’s research notes, only to be injured in the process.

I silently shook my head. All I could say was, “It’s not your fault, Lord Alan.”

As I reflected on that conversation, I apologized to Lord Gene once again for dragging him into this and putting him in danger. He and his grandmother already had ill ties with the royal family, and now they were falling victim all over again because of us.

“I am truly sorry,” I said.

Mabel gaped as I stood there with my head bowed. Although she might disapprove of my actions, I felt compelled to show that my feelings were sincere.

Lord Gene’s lips cracked open, but before he could speak, a cough echoed in the room behind him. He briefly peered over his shoulder before turning his gaze to Mabel. “You have medical knowledge, right? Look after my grandma.”

She smoothed out her facial features and nodded before slipping

in past him. Concerned, I tried to follow her inside, but Lord Gene blocked my way. He sneered at me as if I were the harbinger of misfortune. His eyes said everything that his mouth wouldn't: *If it weren't for you, none of this would have happened.*

Mabel hurriedly called over her shoulder, "Lady Elianna, please go stay with Lord Irvin and the others." No sooner did she finish her sentence than the door was slammed in my face.

Dejected, I tottered back toward the cafeteria. It was along the way that I froze upon hearing some voices.

"You're telling me General Bakula of the Black Wing Knights is dead?!"

"Seriously?!" someone shrieked.

"Shh!" hushed another.

It was a group of miners.

"I heard the patrol talking amongst themselves." They were speaking in low voices, no doubt because the content of the conversation was so shocking. "Two or three days ago, there was a large scale manhunt in Roxas Pass. Turns out the prince's betrothed was attacked there, and General Bakula lost his life in the process. His Highness's bride-to-be is still missing, though, so the patrol was out there searching for her."

"You sure about this?" asked someone, gulping hard. It was obvious from their reaction just how much General Bakula meant to the people of Ralshen. He was a hero who had protected them during the Continental Highway War forty years ago. Grandpa Teddy also attended the memorial service every year. On top of that, he set up his group of knights in Ralshen and continued protecting our eastern border.

"Yep, I'm sure," someone answered in a whisper, their voice heavy with emotion. "Looks like the palace is holding back the official announcement, but the patrol guys were in pretty low spirits and shocked by the loss."

A heavy silence settled over them, but the next murmur was filled with anger.

"What about the culprit?"

"It's gotta be Maldura, right?"

"No idea," the man giving all the details replied. Despite the lack of evidence, their animosity and fury toward Maldura only mounted.

"I'd like to ask," hissed one of them, "why the prince's fiancée was even there in the first place."

"Not sure if it's true or not, but I heard she was trying to take medical supplies to the village near Mt. Urma when she got attacked."

There was a brief, confused silence, as if they couldn't comprehend someone from the royal family doing such a thing. It was

a clear demonstration of how little the people around here trusted us.

“No one can say for sure.”

“Yeah, but General Bakula protected her with his life, right? They haven’t found a body, so she’s gotta be alive. For her to still be missing must mean she ran away. Not surprising. She’s one of those daughters of high nobility. Probably got scared by the Ashen Nightmare and took off.”

“Oh yeah,” said another, as if suddenly remembering something, “speaking of daughters of high nobility, you guys know a bunch of people have been going to the capital lately, right? Seems like there’s a noble girl there who’s been handing out fruit to help prevent the plague. She’s not scared of it in the least. They’re all calling her the ‘Lady Saint’ now.”

“Huh, really?” replied a man who sounded genuinely impressed.

“Both girls are nobility but completely different.”

“What’s this one’s name?”

I continued hovering close to the entrance of the main room where food was being served. The more I listened, the more the darkness seemed to swallow my vision.

“I think they said the girl is Duke Odin’s daughter. I heard that because this plague is sweeping the country, she’s already gotten with the prince and is pregnant with his child.”

“Hah. Well, they do say the royal family’s blood is precious, I guess,” one of them scoffed.

The conversation continued, but I couldn’t bring myself to eavesdrop anymore. My unsteady legs carried me back to my room. I shut the door, effectively sealing off the presence of the other people in the building, and crumbled to my knees. My heart was hammering in my chest. I still hadn’t completely digested what was happening, and now I had to balance that with all this new information.

The day I left the capital, I was determined to fulfill my role. I swore to myself I would do a magnificent job as the prince’s betrothed, to show I was worthy of being by his side. Instead, the unforeseen had happened in succession, and I made the decision to go to the village near Mt. Urma. But was that a mistake?

Perhaps what I should have done was listen to Lord Alexei and rush back to the capital. Then I could have supported the prince as he navigated this disaster. Maybe rushing in to quell a revolt when I couldn’t even protect myself from danger really was foolish after all. If I had obediently returned to the capital, Grandpa Teddy might not have lost his life. Jean might not have betrayed me.

And the prince might not have welcomed Lady Pharmia into his arms!

A muted sob clawed its way up from my throat. I knew I couldn’t believe hearsay. This wasn’t the first time I had been led by the nose

thanks to some rumors. The prince promised me when I left the capital that I was his only queen. Still, I couldn't erase my own anxiety. His Majesty had fallen ill and the royal line was in danger. Thanks to reading history books, I knew how rulers typically chose to see their blood continued. There was no guarantee that Prince Christopher was an exception. He was currently facing a national crisis, one that required him to suspect everyone around him—even his right-hand man, Lord Alexei. He had to be emotionally exhausted. I had no doubt that Lady Pharmia could be there for him in his time of need and support him. That was just the kind of person she was.

It wasn't that I doubted the prince's feelings for me; I held his promise close in my heart. The issue was that I had failed to carry out the duty he entrusted to me, losing Furya's Jar and our only clue to finding a cure in the process. Right now, I questioned whether or not I really deserved to be at his side. I had accomplished nothing. At this point, I was nothing more than a regular bibliophile.

Tears began to well up as my emotions spun out of control, but then a knock sounded at the door.

"El, you in there?" It was Prince Irvin's voice.

I quickly wiped away my tears, but before I could scramble off the floor, the door swung open and smacked me in the head with a loud crack.

"Oh, sorry..." He hesitated. "Uh, but why are you crouched down there on the floor in the first place?" After closing the door, he knelt down beside me and peered into my face. Almost immediately he seemed to sense what was going on. "Aha..." He shifted, seating himself beside me before suddenly reaching a hand out. His palm pressed down on my head, far gentler than I would have expected. "It must have really hurt, but don't worry, the pain will go away soon enough."

Although he was talking about the bump on my head, I got the sense he was trying to comfort the pain I was feeling on the inside. He must have realized I was hurting in the wake of Jean's betrayal and all the other information that had come our way. Normally, he was so sarcastic about everything, always teasing people, but the shift in his attitude coaxed me into lowering my guard.

If I tried to say anything right now, I was sure my emotions would come spilling out. Instead, I silently sat there as he continued to stroke my head. As I fought to blink back the tears, he joked, "You can cry if you want. I'll keep it a secret from the prince."

My heart jumped into my throat. For as dense as I normally was, those words were enough to alarm me. I started to pull away, but as if on instinct, he yanked me back. An unfamiliar scent flooded my nose. I tried to struggle and escape, but his words made me freeze.

“You worked really hard. Don’t worry about what those no names out there have to say. I watched you. I know how much effort you put in. Stop acting tough and lean on me a bit.” The implication was, *Stop trying to do everything by yourself.*

As the prince’s betrothed, I felt like I had to do something to stop the budding war with Maldura, quell the uprising near the Mt. Urma mines, and discover a cure for the plague ravaging our lands. I was desperate to solve all those problems, and yet I’d failed spectacularly.

I felt pathetic, but Prince Irvin was acknowledging all of my efforts. The tears I’d been holding back welled up.

“You really are a stubborn one, which I wouldn’t have guessed at first just by looking at you,” he said as he loosened his arm around me.

That was where I made my mistake: I lifted my head up. Those black eyes peered down at me, seeming to break right through my defenses.

“Elianna, come to Maldura.”

This time when my pulse quickened, I was keenly aware of it. The only people who ever said my name without attaching a “Lady” at the front were my close family, relatives, and...

Prince Irvin caressed my cheek. The heat of his fingertips was so feverish it threatened to swallow my heart. He had a feral look about him that inspired fear, but right now his expression was so soft.

I gulped.

“I would never leave you alone like this. I would never let you cry by yourself, Elianna. I want to steal you away.” His arms tightened around me, pulling me close. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from him.



And that was when I realized something.

Whenever I was in danger or in a tight spot, I could always hear the prince calling to me. But not this time. His voice was being overwritten by the one that now echoed in my ears.

“Elianna.”

Prince Irvin’s foreign scent tickled my nose.

A blizzard had started up again outside, and the whole inn shook from the force of the wind. Right now, I felt like I was out in the middle of it, lost in the snow. Never again would I be able to conjure the image of the prince’s eyes—ones that so resembled a clear blue, sunny sky. I would be forever imprisoned in the cold of winter, dreaming of a spring that would never come.

Arc 2: The Twilight Clock

Chapter 1: The Twilight Mansion

A gust of wind whipped through the undergrowth. It was the height of summer. After a long stretch of clear weather, today was unusually overcast. In lieu of the sun's rays beating down on us, lukewarm air caressed our skin. The light breeze rustled the overgrown grass and shrubs, and just past them was a garden whose many plants had gone untended for some time.

The gate behind us creaked. Two women flanked me on either side, clinging to my arms as they held their breath. Towering over us was a mansion that had long since been abandoned. Time had left the place in disrepair, and an air of melancholy hung over it, made worse by the dark clouds overhead.

One of the girls clinging to me gulped, summoning her courage to say, "It really does look haunted. But this is fine. We have Miss Eli on our side. An eye for an eye, a ghost for a ghost."

I, Elianna Bernstein, heaved a sigh as I recalled our previous conversation.

"A seance for the nobility?"

It was afternoon. I was riding in a carriage with Jean and two of my cousins, Julia and Lilia.

One of my best friends, Lady Therese Ardolino, had discovered she was pregnant a few days ago. We visited her today to deliver a congratulatory gift. After engaging in some small talk, we bid her farewell and were on our way home. Our conversation had remained lighthearted while we chatted with Lady Therese, but once we were in our carriage again, the girls switched to the hot topic making the rounds at court.

"Remember that book you were reading before, *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*? The Twilight Mansion is mentioned in it. Lately, some of the nobility have been secretly gathering there to conduct seances. Pretty interesting, don't you think, Miss Eli?" Lilia's face lit up with curiosity. She was still only fifteen years old.

I tilted my head, confused about what part she found so interesting. *A Hundred Tales of Mystery* was a collection of stories about abnormal phenomena in the capital as well as bizarre accounts from people's daily lives. I did enjoy the book, but seances had never appealed to me.

Frustrated with how thick I was being, Lilia frowned and said, "The mansion is haunted. That's why they conduct the seances there. Instead of just reading about these ghosts you so love, maybe you should go and see one for yourself."

You're mistaken, Lilia. Just because I enjoy the book doesn't mean I particularly like ghosts.

"These seances are supposedly at night, so of course we won't be able to participate, but we could still go to the location. Come on, Miss Eli, can't we make just a little detour?"

In other words, this was her way of needling me to stop by so she could have a look.

Well, I don't have anything else planned after this...

As I sat there waffling back and forth, Julia scolded her younger sister. "Eli is engaged to the crown prince. She cannot simply go places on a whim."

Her words made my pulse jump, and a warmth enveloped me. Ever since the prince and I confirmed our feelings for one another, every day had been bright and full of cheer. Although, I was often left flustered by the abundance of skinship he lavished on me. Those who were around when it happened always had uncomfortable looks on their faces.

Lilia's spirits were slightly dampened by her sister's admonishment, but she still peered up at me pleadingly. "Isn't there any way at all I could convince you to go?"

Lilia had only made her debut into high society last year. She was insistent on keeping up with all of the latest trends and gossip among the other nobles, though her actions were rooted more in curiosity than anything else.

I gave her a strained smile and nodded. "I suppose if it's only for a little bit."

"Woohoo!" Lilia clapped her hands together.

Julia drew her brows, at a loss for words.

Jean, on the other hand, wrinkled his nose. "If we go off schedule, the demon lord'll descend from his throne of evil." He was mumbling to himself, but I honestly had no idea what any of it meant.

We stepped out of our carriage and took a narrow pathway up to the residence in question. The Twilight Mansion, as it was referred to in *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*, was once the estate of a noblewoman who met with great misfortune before her untimely death. Unable to rest in peace, her spirit lingered, haunting the halls of the mansion. It was abandoned after she passed.

Standing in front of the place, it was easy to see why it was included in a book on hauntings. There was a loneliness to the

mansion since it had no inhabitants. Cracks ran across the exterior, and ivy crawled up the walls. It was so dilapidated and eerie that it wouldn't surprise me at all if there were ghosts here.

Naturally, Julia and Lilia were too intimidated to step closer. Jean just eyed the building and mumbled, "I'll take a look around the perimeter."

Since my two cousins were still frozen in place, I said, "Um, well, since we have already seen it, shall we go home?"

Lilia jumped in surprise and opened her mouth to protest just as rain began pelting us.

"Goodness." I looked up as the clouds unleashed their fury, sending large droplets cascading toward us.

"Oh no!" Lilia squeaked as she pushed me from behind. The three of us hurried up to the entrance of the mansion, taking shelter under the eaves.

A few seconds later, heavy rain began beating down on the roof. It was a sudden downpour that left large puddles all over the ground where we had walked only moments prior. A chilling wind roared around us as the clouds above rolled in, trapping the area in a dreary darkness. We crowded together for warmth.

The torrential rain didn't seem like it would let up any time soon. We started fretting over what to do when we suddenly heard the chiming of a pendulum clock. The door behind us abruptly cracked open as a voice called, "Young ladies?"

"Eep!" Julia squealed as we all whipped around. I only belatedly remembered then that Julia didn't deal well with anything horror-related.

So why wasn't she more strongly opposed to coming here in the first place?

Our eyes landed on an old man. He had a warm expression and a graceful atmosphere about him, which made him seem terribly out of place given the haunted mansion behind him. After glancing between us, he seemed to guess what we were here for.

"You're here awfully early. The seance won't be conducted until much later. Still, you should come inside to take shelter from the rain."

The three of us exchanged looks.

In order to put us at ease, he explained that he was hired as a caretaker by the nobles to keep the place in order while they conducted their seances.

"And while it may still be summer, you will catch cold if you stay out in that weather," the man said before beckoning us in once more. "Please, come inside."

We nodded, agreeing to stay only until the rain stopped, and

ventured inside. The interior was surprisingly nothing like the decaying exterior. It had been thoroughly cleaned, which wasn't entirely surprising since the nobles were conducting their seances here. However, the place did lack sufficient lighting. What little did exist cast shadows everywhere.

Lilia and Julia took cover behind me, using me as a shield as we proceeded down the corridor. The way they clung to my back reminded me of the Old Crying Man ghost which I read about in *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*. Basically, the Old Crying Man would clutch onto his victim, pressing himself against their back as his weight gradually increased until he crushed them to death.

"Knowing Miss Eli, I have a feeling if she did run into a ghost, they'd mistake her for one of their own," said Lilia.

"You have a good point there," Julia agreed. "We can't let our guard down. If the ghost is going to possess anyone, they won't pick Eli. We're the ones in danger."

All I am getting out of this is that the two of you have some very wild delusions about what kind of person I am.

The old man navigated the halls with a confident stride that said he'd traversed them many times before. He brought us to a room crammed full of paintings.

"Goodness, this place is..." My voice trailed off as I glanced around the room, fascinated.

As if he could read my mind, the old man chuckled and nodded. "Well then, what portrait are you ladies here searching for?"

"Pardon?" I blurted, tilting my head.

He smiled. "At a seance, you call upon the spirits of the dead. Thus, the nobles always bring a portrait of the person they want to connect with. Like you ladies, many other young women come here to sneak a peek at who their husband or lover is trying to contact."

"Oh my." I was a bit surprised by that revelation. I wasn't well-versed on what a seance entailed, but it was the first time I had ever heard that a portrait was required for conducting one.

The man turned his gaze to the paintings, eyes wistful. "We keep the portraits stored here before later taking them to the temple. If you wish to search through them, now is your only chance." For a moment, it sounded as if he was trying to goad us into it, but then he said, "However, while there are many kinds of seances all over the world, those we conduct at the Twilight Mansion are always deeply sincere and respectful. Once a portrait is used at a seance, the owner is not allowed to take it home with them. We dispose of them after the owner has made contact with the spirit. That's the rule. Seances are only for those so desperate to meet a spirit again and communicate with them that they're willing to lose that portrait forever. To learn

the secrets of communicating with the dead requires an equivalent sacrifice.” His voice was firm as he explained.

Silence fell for a few moments before Lilia summoned her courage to entreat the old man. My eyes widened as she spoke.

“Which one of these was brought by Viscount Earnshaw’s son?”

“Lilia!” shrieked Julia.

Lilia rebutted, “If we don’t search now, what was the point in coming? You want to know too, don’t you?”

“Yes, but...”

“You’re the one who was so worried because of how strange your fiancé has been acting recently. That’s why I told you about the rumors I heard—about how he’s taking part in these seances.”

After hearing their exchange, I finally understood what was happening. Julia was the same age as me—eighteen—and just a year ago, she became engaged to the son of a viscount house. I had met the man several times. His name was Lord Rupert Earnshaw. He was twenty-three years old. From what I had seen of him, he was quieter and more reserved than the other nobles of his age, but he did hold strong opinions and wasn’t afraid to voice them. If he and Julia did marry, their union promised to be a solid one where both wife and husband would support one another. Or so I thought. Were the two of them not seeing eye to eye now?

“Hm...” The old man began glancing between the portraits.

“Viscount Earnshaw’s son, you say...”

Julia and Lilia watched with bated breath, waiting for him to stop on the portrait that belonged to Lord Rupert.

“Wait a moment,” I blurted without thinking, interrupting them.

If things continued and she exposed one of her fiancé’s secrets, how would their relationship fare then? Would Julia not later come to regret her actions?

“Julia, I honestly think you should have a heart-to-heart with Lord Rupert and ask him yourself,” I said.

Her lips pulled taut. Even she knew what she was doing was wrong. Yet she was too afraid to ask him outright. Knowing he was keeping secrets made her anxious.

“The two of you are engaged,” I continued. “If there is some reason he can’t disclose the truth to you, I am sure he will tell you—”

“What would you know?!” she bellowed, which was rare for Julia; she was normally so quiet. “Prince Christopher loves you deeply. You both wanted to get married and that’s why you got engaged. I only found my partner thanks to my parents’ connections and because I’m related to the crown prince’s betrothed. My situation is completely different from yours. Lord Rupert couldn’t refuse me if he wanted to. Maybe he already had someone else he loved.” Her voice trembled as

she practically sobbed out the words. “There’s no way I could ask him, not if that’s his secret!” She promptly spun around and dashed out of the room.

“Julia!” Lilia called after her sister, panicked. She scrambled toward the door and paused to glance back at me. “Sorry, Miss Eli.” Her face was lined with guilt as she disappeared into the hallway.

I stood there, abandoned, with only our guide for company.

Chapter 2: The Twilight Secret

The low chime of a pendulum clock reverberated through the halls of the mansion. As I stood there and listened to it, I reflected on how insensitive I had been. Since the prince and I confessed our feelings, every day had been so enjoyable. I never gave any thought to the repercussions our union would have on those around me. It was obvious my new title would change things for the rest of my family, once I thought about it, but that made me feel all the more shallow for not realizing it sooner.

As I sighed to myself, the old man chuckled quietly. “It must be nice being so young and having so many worries.”

“Is having worries something to be envious of?” I asked, doubtful.

“When you get old like me, you don’t have worries so much as you have a mountain of regrets. Facing these trials and struggling to overcome them is a special privilege for the young. Enjoy it while you can.”

I fixed my gaze on the old man, perplexed by his view.

“Well,” he said, changing the subject as he ushered me toward the door, “since you don’t seem to have any interest in the portraits, why don’t I give you a tour of the mansion instead?”

He led me to some of the famous places listed in *A Hundreds Tales of Mystery in the Capital*. There was a mirror, where the deceased owner’s reflection was said to reappear at night. Next was a haunted banister. It was said that when you touched it, you would feel the cold, heavy weight of another hand clasping yours. After that was a wardrobe, where the deceased owner’s favorite dress was said to materialize out of nowhere. There was also a room with an empty birdcage. Here, it was said the former owner’s voice could be heard singing together with her bird. The old man explained each area to me one by one before we arrived at a window on the second story, one overlooking a garden that hadn’t been tended to for some time.

“They say you can find the lady’s spirit lingering in front of that window over there when the sun begins to set.”

I glanced through the glass. Rain was still pouring down outside.

There was a brief lull in our conversation, as if the old man was lost in thought, but he soon recovered and asked, “Why do you think she picks that window? There are so many others in the house. What do you think makes that one special?”

“Huh?” I asked, taken aback by his sudden query. After a momentary pause and some brief contemplation, I said, “I assume she must have enjoyed the view?”

“Indeed.” He smiled sadly. “A window is a way to enjoy the scenery, but it is also a place where one tends to wait when they’re anticipating someone’s return. Young Miss, have you heard the stories about the lady of this manor?”

My chest throbbed at the mention. “Yes, I have.”

The lady of this manor had suffered a tragic past. At one point, she was regarded as the flower of high society for her beauty, but she was later roped into a political marriage with a fellow noble. The man in question was unfaithful; he kept a lover on the side and even had children with her. Such stories weren’t altogether unheard of among the aristocracy. Nonetheless, the lady still waited longingly for her husband’s return each day. Her beauty began to fade with the passage of time, but even as she aged in solitude, she would still wait at the window as the sun set each day. That was what earned this place the name of Twilight Manor.

The old man nodded, turning his gaze toward the window. “All the strange phenomena that happen in this manor should be terrifying, and yet they also act as subtle reminders of the woman that once graced these halls. Perhaps it’s proof that there was someone who thought fondly of her as well.” His voice was so soothing that I found myself nodding along as I stared out at the rain.

I wondered if you could see the main gate from this window. Maybe that was why she waited here, hoping to see her beloved as he rode up. I could almost picture her.

As the old man and I lost ourselves in our imaginations, a voice called up from the floor below.

“Miss Eli, where are you?” It was Lilia.

I peered over the railing and responded, “Lilia? Julia?” I kept my eyes on them and started moving toward the stairs, not noticing there was a flower vase in front of me until it was too late. Fortunately, it was heavy enough that me brushing up against it didn’t even make it wobble. However, the dried-up flowers inside instantly turned to dust, sprinkling down over my two cousins.

“Eek!” they screamed.

I scrambled down the stairs to check on them. The whole situation reminded me of another spirit I had read about in *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*—the Sand-throwing Hag.

“Julia, Lilia! I am so sorry. Are you both all right?”

After brushing off the dust from the dried flowers, Lilia grumbled, “I can’t believe you! Look, I understand you might find it scary being mistaken as a fellow spirit by the other ghostly inhabitants here, but

that doesn't mean you get to scare us to death just so we'll join you!"

You seem to have some really odd ideas about me, Cousin, so I think perhaps we ought to have a talk so we can clear those up.

As I helped them dust off their clothes, Julia turned to me with a guilty look on her face and said, "Eli, I'm sorry."

"Huh?" I froze as our gazes met. Her brown eyes were filled with regret.

"Four years ago when you returned to the capital, I was incredibly ill due to an imbalance in my body. You were the one who found medicine to help me. It was thanks to your efforts that I could start casually engaging in and enjoying high society. Likewise, I wouldn't have met Lord Rupert if not for you. I can't believe how ungrateful I was, taking all my emotions out on you like that."

I quickly shook my head. "No, I owe you an apology as well. I didn't even realize there was anything bothering you. I should have known what kind of pressure it would put on the rest of you when I got engaged. So I'm sorry, too."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I'm the one at fault. It was just like you said, I should ask Lord Rupert directly."

"But it does require a great amount of courage to ask someone you care about to disclose their secrets. I was being arrogant when I —"

"Not at all," she interrupted. The two of us stared at one another, and after a moment, we erupted into laughter. Lilia soon began giggling along with us.

Julia and I flashed embarrassed smiles at one another. Having regained my composure, I extended a hand toward her as a sign that I wanted to put this disagreement behind us.

"Eli, I love you," she said.

The words were so direct that my cheeks warmed, but I was happy to have her affection. "I love you too, Julia. And I especially love how sincere you are."

"Oh my," Lilia chirped as she joined the conversation. "Well, I love both of you! Julia, for always seeming so composed even though she's secretly holding it all in until she can't take anymore and explodes, and Eli, for being so easily mistaken as a ghost simply because she spaces out and stands in the shadows all the time."

That's not half the compliment you seem to think it is, Lilia.

Inside the dimly lit manor, the three of us beamed at one another.

The old man's soft voice cut in. "It appears you girls don't need to know the secrets behind the portraits anymore."

Julia nodded, firm in her determination. "No, I don't need to see whose portrait he brought. I realize now that keeping my anxiety all to myself won't solve anything. This is the man I've decided I want to

spend the rest of my life with. Whatever his situation is, I need to hear it from his lips.”

Given her straightforward personality, it was the perfect answer.

Warmed by her resolve, I squeezed her hand tightly, hoping to encourage her. She glanced back at me and smiled.

“That’s good to hear,” mumbled the old man. “Nothing good comes from revealing the secrets that people keep. When someone exposes the mistakes you made in your youth, the person who will be hurt the most is the one you hold dearest. It can lead to a spiral of misunderstandings. And then no amount of apologies will ever be enough to mend the bridges burned.” He paused. “What’s most important is that you’re honest when you convey your feelings.”

Especially if you want to be with that person forever, his words seem to imply.

The three of us listened to his advice, filled with emotion. No sooner had he finished than the pendulum clock began to chime, the volume so earsplitting that it sent vibrations through the manor. Julia shrieked, throwing her arms around me. Lilia clamped her hands over her ears and shrank in on herself. I stiffened and waited for it to end. By the time it was over and I lifted my face, the old man was gone.

“Oh?” As I glanced around, we heard a crashing noise.

Lilia gulped and started clinging to me as well. Between her and Julia, I was locked firmly in place.

If you two would kindly unhand me, I’d like to check out the source of this disturbance.

“Miss Eli! What are we going to do if a real ghost *does* suddenly pop out?!”

This coming from the girl who has been calling me a ghost this entire time. Honestly, Lilia...

After all the commotion, someone’s voice echoed. It seemed to be coming from the portrait room the old man had first guided us to. After reassuring my two cousins, we started heading toward the source. I explained to Lilia and Julia that there were no stories about talking portraits so they needn’t worry about that, and as we swung the door open, all sound inside stopped.

I hadn’t paid any mind to it earlier, but the room was rather eerie with its poor lighting and the rows of portraits everywhere. No wonder my cousins were so unsettled.

Right as I plucked up my courage and stepped inside, one of the paintings smiled at us and began to speak. “I found you.” The person inside the frame had lips painted red with what looked to be blood.

Lilia and Julia screeched at the top of their lungs before flying out of the room. I was left behind, stiff as a statue.



The young man in the portrait gaped in shock at our reaction. “I can’t believe...those girls looked at me...and screamed in terror.” After a brief pause and with his face contorted in despair, he added, “It’s me...Alan.” His voice was stiff and unnatural, and as he stepped closer, I stared back at him, wide-eyed.

Jean popped out from beside him. “Ah, there you are, m’lady. You really are a troublemaker. Please don’t go disappearin’ off like that. I was almost shakin’ in my boots thinkin’ about the murderous rage the demon lord would be in once he heard.”

Pardon?

Confused as to what he was referring to, I could only blink back at him. That was when I realized—the thing I’d thought was a picture frame around Lord Alan was actually the edges of a window frame.

Jean pointed at Lord Alan’s lips. “You’re bleedin’.”

“Ah, I was struggling with the window and busted my lip on it when it finally came free.”

Chapter 3: The Twilight Promise

After calling Julia and Lilia back to the room, the boys proceeded to explain what had happened.

When we took a detour instead of heading straight home in our carriage, someone sent word to Lord Alan. He came straight away to check on us. Meanwhile, Jean and the other guards began a panicked search of the premises after we suddenly disappeared.

My goodness.

Our faces drew in confusion as the three of us traded glances.

“Oh,” Lord Alan exclaimed with a bitter smile as he pointed out the window. “The prince has come to check on you.”

I peered out the window. The rain had stopped at some point, and it was already dusk. In the dim light that remained, the prince’s bright blond hair shone beautifully as he stepped through the manor’s main gate. He cut across the garden and paused when he noticed us standing in the window. His blue eyes sparkled and a smile lit up his face. “Eli!”

My heart pounded as my chest filled with joy. It was as if the man I’d long been waiting for had finally come home to me.

Prince Christopher was accompanied by Lord Glen and his other bodyguards. They gave him a rundown of the situation as they strode over toward our window. His expression was one of exasperation as he stared up at us.

“Eli,” he said again.

I could already predict what he would say next. *“It’s not proper for the prince’s betrothed to be taking detours and giving her bodyguards the slip.”* I stiffened as I waited for his reproach.

Julia suddenly pushed her way to the front and said, “P-Prince Christopher, it wasn’t Eli... I mean, I was the one who convinced her to take this side trip. It’s not her fault this happened. If you want to scold anyone, it should be me!” In her haste to explain, she nearly tripped over her own words, but Lilia nodded in agreement with her.

Honestly, I was the one who made the final decision, so I still thought I held responsibility here.

A bright smile appeared on the prince’s face. “I’m not going to chastise her over a mere side trip. Though I’m not too happy about her slipping away from her bodyguards, I’d rather punish her than scold her.”

I'm sorry, come again?

He chuckled as he stretched his hand up toward me. "Come, Eli."

Encouraged by his invitation, I reached toward him before pausing as I realized how unbecoming it was to hop out of a window like this. "No, um...I should meet you at the entrance instead."

Jean said, "There's a chain around the front door, so you won't be gettin' out through there. We haven't found any other entrances to the place either. How in the world did you even get in here, m'lady?"

"What?" I stared back at him in disbelief.

"You suddenly disappeared, so we assumed you had to be inside," Lord Alan explained. "Is there some other entrance besides this window?"

"What are you saying?" Julia furrowed her brows. "This is the Twilight Manor where the nobles are holding their seances, isn't it?"

"About that... Those are actually held at the Setting Sun Manor, not this one. People apparently make that mistake occasionally and come here instead, but no one has ever been able to get inside, so they've always given up and gone home."

Blood drained from my cousins' faces.

In that case, who was the elderly man who invited us in, I wonder?

"Noooo!" Lilia began swinging her hands through the air as if to wave off the fear threatening to consume her. "I've had it! I knew this would happen. The ghost here thought Miss Eli was one of them—that's why it appeared! We never had any intention of attending an actual seance, you know!"

As Lilia wailed, Julia turned deathly pale. "Eli, I do love you dearly, b-but I'm not fond of getting cozy with spirits..." She retreated several steps, putting some distance between us.

Excuse me, but I have to ask, do you two truly think all of the ghosts in this world only appear because of me?

After the ensuing fuss died down, we began descending the window one by one until all of us were safely inside the garden, where the evening air was fresh and clean in the wake of the rain. To be more precise, we were carried down because the overgrown grass was slick with water and too dangerous for us to navigate. Lord Glen and his subordinates took care of Julia and Lilia. The latter was in high spirits since she rarely got to experience a gentleman's arms wrapped around her like this.

I, of course, was carried down by Prince Christopher. He lifted me up by my knees, keeping me practically perched on his shoulder where I could stare down at him. It was a bit of an embarrassing pose.

"I'm not heavy, am I?" I asked.

"Of course not." His cheerful answer coaxed a smile out of me.

As we all began to head for the carriages, Julia suddenly called

over to me. “Hey, Eli. I’m going to summon all my courage to have an honest talk with Lord Rupert, so I want you to make sure you’re honest with the prince as well when it comes to your feelings.”

The prince froze, still carrying me so my dress wouldn’t get wet. “Her feelings?” he repeated, a brow quirked.

I panicked. True, hearing what the old man had to say and learning how the lady of the manor had suffered gave me a lot to think about, but...did I really have to confront all of that today?

The rest of the guards, who were still carrying Julia and Lilia, politely excused themselves and left the two of us alone. Evening twilight spilled over us as we remained in the overgrown garden. I had no place to run, even if I wanted to.

“Eli, please tell me what she was hinting at. What is it you’re feeling?”

I hesitated, inwardly waffling back and forth. Part of me was consumed with intense embarrassment, and part of me wanted to make a run for it.

The prince was so special to me. I wanted to spend forever with him and only him. In order for that to happen, I had to be sincere with my words so misunderstandings didn’t form between us. That meant learning from Julia’s example and plucking up the courage to voice how I felt.

“I love you, Prince Christopher. Please stay with me forever.” My face lit up brighter than the evening sun.

His Highness stumbled. Panicked, I latched onto his shoulder. I didn’t think he would actually drop me, but the sudden movement surprised me.

“Your Highness?”

“Eli, what kind of punishment is this? My hands are preoccupied holding you up, so I can’t do anything else with them. You’re killing me here.”

I had absolutely no idea what he meant by that.

The prince continued holding me in his arms as he groaned to himself. His eyes wandered the area as if looking for some kind of bench or pedestal where he could set me down. Alas, the garden was so overgrown that he couldn’t find anything. He let out a small sigh as he resigned himself. His face fell as he glanced back up at me.

I gulped, and my pulse quickened again. The evening sun was reflected in the blue of his eyes, and in them I found a mix of emotions—pain and a gentle sweetness. His voice was warm as he spoke. “Eli, I love you, too. And I always, always, *always* want to be with you.”

His confession made my stomach flutter as joy flooded my chest. “Yes, me too!” The two of us exchanged smiles.

“In that case,” he said, “let’s seal this promise.”

“All right.” I nodded without thinking and then froze. *Wait, what does he mean by “seal this promise”?*

“Unfortunately, both of my hands are preoccupied at the moment. So you’ll have to be the one to seal our promise.” He grinned at me. For as slow as I was, the implication was still immediately clear.

“Y-You mean...”

“Yes.” His Highness continued smiling blithely, fully aware he was backing me into a corner by doing so.

Is this what he meant earlier when he mentioned punishing me?

He chuckled as I hesitated. “Eli?” There was a mischievous note to his voice, but the passion in his eyes was genuine.

After some more intense deliberation and hesitation, I finally plucked up the nerve and bent down toward him. As I drew closer to those beautiful blue eyes, my heart squeezed. I planted a kiss on his cheek. That was the extent of my courage.



The prince let an embarrassed smile slip. In the distance, a pendulum clock chimed, announcing the sun's final descent.

A few days later, an embarrassed Julia came to report on what happened between her and Lord Rupert. As it turned out, Lord Rupert had been close with his grandmother, and she often chastised him for not understanding a woman's feelings. Sadly, she passed a few years back, and the reason he began attending these seances to see her once again was because he wanted courting advice. After all, he and Julia hadn't even been engaged a year yet. If that wasn't evidence enough of his feelings for her, then her chipper mood was certainly a dead giveaway.

There was one more matter. After the debacle in the Twilight Manor, I was curious about all of the portraits we saw in that room. I discovered who the current owner of the place was and requested an appraisal of the paintings. The painter was anonymous, but an art critic gave the works high praise, drawing great attention to them. In the wake of this newfound fame, restoration efforts began on the Twilight Manor to bring it back to its former glory. It would soon be opened to the public as an art museum. A few paintings depicting stories of the former owner, inspired by *A Hundred Tales of Mystery in the Capital*, were slated to appear as well.

Afterword

Saying hi from the ground below is me, Yui! That's right, I am writing this afterword to you while also prostrating myself on the floor. It's been about a year now since I brought you all the last installment of this series, and yet it's still not finished. I'm sorry. No, truly, I am.

As I was writing this volume, I stopped to count how many days had passed from Eli's perspective and—get this—it's only been four days. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so, so sorry. I'm so—oh, I don't have to apologize anymore?

Um... Hahaha, a year sure does pass by fast, doesn't it? (Yeah, okay, I'm making excuses, but let's just leave it at that!)

No, but seriously, I acted like everything was going well, but deep down I was full of anxiety. (Midway through and nearly in tears, I was about ready to throw in the towel and say, "Enough! I'm sick of this!") Nonetheless, I continued diligently writing and managed to finish what is now the fifth volume of this series. (And yet only four days have actually passed in the story...)

Anyway, enough raking me over the coals for taking forever; let's talk about something else.

You're probably wondering why it's still winter in the story when so much time has passed IRL, and the answer, I'm afraid, would have you throwing things at me. (Please recycle your empty soda cans. And whatever you do, don't throw food; this author is already at her wit's end and acting strange enough as it is. You don't need to feed her and make it worse.)

So yeah, that aside, this is the situation I originally planned from the very beginning. The prince had to step up in his father's place, he and one of his close friends had a showdown, and now danger has befallen his relationship with Eli. I stuffed so many ideas in here.

My friend, who's normally not very soft on male characters, actually surprised me when she said, "I feel bad for the prince." (Woohoo! I did it! Wait a minute. This wasn't my original objective...)

Yeaaaah, Chris's chastity is in some serious danger here. I'm also excited to see how he manages to overcome this challenge! Oh, wait. I'm the writer, aren't I?

Hmm. I'm the one who created his character to begin with, but no matter how big of a pickle he gets himself into, I can't imagine it

being that serious. He has a habit of being able to smooth talk his way out of any situation, so I'm not really worried for him. (I am actually complimenting him here, by the way.)

That leaves us with our protagonist, Elianna. Her struggles are still continuing. In fact, as I was writing this volume, I figured you readers would respond more to Eli's predicament than Chris's. I suspected you would all be angry, but your reactions were so much worse than I thought. It was almost scary lol.

Well, that's just proof of how much our spacey protagonist means to all of you. As her creator, I am so grateful and, for lack of a better way to express myself, happy.

This time, there were three main people who had a large impact on Chris and Eli. One of them has already passed away (Grandpa Teddy), but how will Eli and Chris deal with the other two? If possible, I hope you'll continue reading and find out.

Also, for the publication of this volume, I shuffled the chapter order a bit so it's slightly different from the web version. After I finished and asked my editor for her input, she said, "Oh, how odd. It's so much easier to read and so much more organized than the web version."

I feel like I owe her an apology. I mean, I am truly grateful to her, though. She's always helping me get the story back on track, giving me a new perspective in the process. I'm always bowing my head as we converse over the phone.

Anyway, the main story has gotten incredibly serious, but my more playful side still yearns to add in some humor and lightheartedness here and there. As usual, I suffer from the eternal plague that is writer's block, but how should I put this... Through defiance—or maybe complete desperation—I managed to include some humor in this volume before I finished it. I hope you were able to enjoy it.

And speaking of my most feared topic and that which is most difficult for me to write...let's talk about the short story at the end. I really drove my editor nuts with this one, writing it through endless tears and sleepless nights. And every time I finish these short stories, I sit there and wonder what the heck is wrong with me, fussing over something that always turns out to be insanely short. Of course, I'm only able to berate myself like that *after* I finish writing it all out.

The image I had in my head was of the summer shortly after the events in the first volume. And in Japan, when you think of summer, you think ghost stories. Summer also means getting lovey-dovey at dusk. And yeah, that about sums up my original idea.

To no one's great surprise, I was on the verge of tears as I wrote it, and if you're wondering why Eli's cousins kept taking jabs at her

about being a ghost, that was my impish side shining through.

I am sure many of you probably already know this, but Bibliophile Princess is being adapted into a manga by the lovely Yui Kikuta-sensei. Her drawings of Eli had me squeeing, “Cuuute!” over and over again. And thus, being as twisted as I am, I felt strangely compelled to return Eli to the ghostly character she was meant to be.

Lilia wasn’t the one disparaging Eli; she was merely being a stand-in for the author. So if you have complaints about her attitude, you can direct them at me lol.

When three girls step into a haunted house, someone inevitably gets chosen to lead them. I speak from my own experiences as I say that. And yet as I was reading back over it, it reminded me of a scene from the comedy trio Dacho Club where one of the guys is telling his friends, “Whatever you do, don’t push me, okay? Don’t push me!”

Chronologically, this arc takes place after *The Desire to Cheat* and before *The Flower Protector*, but Eli and Chris are already quite intimate. That’s partly my way of apologizing to them for all I’ve put them through in this volume, as well as my way of thanking you readers and offering some fan service since you have stuck with me this long. I hope you’ll be forgiving with me in exchange!

And now, as I continue to prostrate myself, I must make a confession. I, Yui, could lower my head so far it’d pierce past the earth’s mantle and it would still not be enough of an apology for all the trouble I caused everyone. To the lead editor, lead proofreader, the illustrator (Sheena-sensei), and everyone else involved with the publication of this series: I bow my head all the way down past the earth’s core—that’s how sorry I am. I dare not even look up at any of you because of the guilt I feel and am instead groveling.

Yes, I really am sorry.

To my editor, who no doubt experiences great stomachaches every time we go through this, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for sticking with me through everything and giving me words of encouragement.

To the illustrator, Sheena-sensei, your art was a great inspiration to me this time as well. There were serious scenes, comedic ones, romantic ones, and seeing all of the emotion in all of them made me glad I struggled through and finished writing this volume. I never dreamed I would get to see a 4-koma (four panel manga) page with your art lol.

And to the head proofreader who let me keep proofreading up until the very last second, as well as to everyone else who had a hand in this book, thank you once again.

Of course, I can’t forget to thank my friends and family who

suffered essay-length Line messages from me as well.

Bibliophile Princess has been blessed with the opportunity to be adapted into a manga by Yui Kikuta-sensei. Through her magnificent art, many more people will encounter my story. I feel so blessed to have both Kikuta-sensei and Sheena-sensei drawing these characters, and I think both artists really bring out the cast's charm. I truly feel lucky that through their drawings, my story will touch many more readers.

I'm so deeply grateful to all of my readers as well. Those of you who stuck with me from the beginning as well as the new readers and anyone else who has picked up one of my books and enjoyed it. I still have a long way to go as an author, but I hope you will continue to enjoy this story with me.

It's summer now as I write this, but wherever you are, whether it's hot or cold, I hope you take care of yourselves. I pray we'll soon meet again!

-Yui

Bonus Short Stories

A Day in the Bernstein House

A man's hoarse cry reverberated through the halls. I, Annie, paused in the midst of my cleaning and exchanged glances with Sheila, another maid who was working in the same room as me. The two of us were accustomed to these occurrences.

"I wonder who the unfortunate soul is today," said Sheila.

The Bernsteins were a marquess house in the Sauslind Kingdom, but despite their status, they didn't use their money to live in the lap of luxury or show off their wealth. If anything, their estate was rather tranquil compared to other aristocratic houses in the capital. That was probably surprising given their rank and titles, but as I soon learned when I started working for them, there was a very different kind of liveliness at their residence.

To begin with, the marquess had a habit of skipping meals and missing out on sleep once he got hooked on a book. Rather fitting for the head of a family that loved books more than anything else. The man didn't have a lot of free time, given his position in our government, but he would immerse himself in reading whenever he could find a spare moment. This meant he often neglected to go to bed. In the morning, when a maid would enter his quarters to open the curtains, they would often find him sprawled on the floor, as if he had collapsed there, and would shriek in fear. This was a nearly daily occurrence.

Next was the marquess's son, Lord Alfred. The young master had his father's mild manner and often offered praise and reassurance to the servants. However, as with the rest of his book-loving family, he always had his nose stuck in some tome. His special skill was his ability to walk and read at the same time. Although, we often heard screams of surprise from any maid or manservant unlucky enough to bump into him.

Just the other day, a maid was balancing a vase in her arms when he plowed right into her. The water she had freshly changed out splashed all over him. The poor girl turned white as a sheet and shrieked. Lord Alfred, on the other hand, continued walking as if nothing had happened. Incidentally, his book was completely unharmed; he'd swiftly moved it out of the way before it got doused

along with him. For as distracted as he always seemed, Lord Alfred had surprisingly sharp reflexes.

On the topic of anomalies, I also occasionally heard groaning from the kitchen, as if whomever was on the other side of the door had seen something life shattering. The most recent conversation I caught wind of went something like this:

"I figured there'd be nothin' wrong with eatin' this since it looks like your regular old green veggie, but what in the heck is it?"

"Ah, that's something the young miss had imported from abroad. It's a spice. I believe she said it's called a 'jalapeno.'"

"Can't believe she set a trap for me here of all places... She got me good," he groaned. The way he said this made it sound as if he were some kind of vermin who had been raiding our kitchens, only to be done in by a mousetrap.

The last individual in this house to watch out for was Lady Elianna. At first glance, she looked like an adorable porcelain doll, even more so because her expression lacked any emotion or sign of life. It gave her an eerie air that made many mistake her for a ghost. Despite how long I had spent at her side, even I sometimes squeaked in surprise when she caught me off guard. Lady Elianna in particular seemed to produce the most screams in this house.

I wonder who she's scared the daylights out of this time. Resigned, I wandered toward the source of the noise. When I peered into the room in question, I sucked in a sharp breath and almost shrieked myself.

The lighting inside was dim, but a face stood out in the darkness. It resembled a human's, but its features were pushed in and disfigured. Fortunately, it was merely a mask and not a real person's face.

"Oh, Annie," called the person wearing it.

For a moment, I thought I had been cursed.

"Wait. Is that you, my lady?"

The person wearing that grotesque thing was none other than Lady Elianna. Apparently she had taken an interest in Lord Alfred's mask collection.

"You're impossible," I said, sighing. "A noblewoman like you shouldn't be entertaining herself with such things. I implore you, find some other interest to indulge in, please."

"But aren't you curious about how different the world looks through these tiny eye holes?"

"Not even remotely." I could only shake my head. For a noble, she really did have a strange way of looking at the world.

A man was sitting on the floor nearby with his legs spread out beneath him. He must have been the source of all the screaming

earlier. No doubt he'd collapsed there out of fear.

He pulled himself to his feet and let out a dry laugh. His uniform was one I had seen before—an ensemble worn by the guards working at the royal palace. Apparently he'd been sent here by the crown prince to escort Lady Elianna.

“Oh my, it's already that time?” Lady Elianna asked, flustered.

Again, I sighed. No doubt this would stir up even more scandalous rumors about the crown prince's betrothed.

Yes, you heard me correctly; the lady of this house was engaged to the country's crown prince. This royal connection surely made the citizenry and other nobility look upon the family with awe, but in reality, the Bernsteins were a profoundly bizarre bunch that had their servants screaming on the daily. As a citizen of Sauslind, I couldn't help fearing for what impact that would have on the royal family. They were a symbol for our country, but if Lady Elianna was going to start living with them in the future, the palace might soon be filled with screaming every day as well.

Precious Time

Someone important once imparted these words to me: “There's a special magic in the time you spend with the people you love.”

The events that day started by accident. As usual, I was immersed in books in the royal archives. Intoxicated by the information I'd newly digested, I wandered to the neighboring break room.

“Here you are, Lord Alfred,” said someone curtly. There was a slight tremor to their voice, as if they were trying to hide how nervous they were.

I, Elianna Bernstein, paused just outside the doorway.

“Thank you, Lady Anna.” I recognized the second voice; it belonged to my older brother.

After the Autumn Hunting Festival ended, Lady Anna returned with us to the capital in order to begin her work here. We had been engaging in casual discussion about historical events ever since. That was how I knew she frequented the break room in the archives.

What I heard as I eavesdropped was like a scene out of a play.

My brother was sipping on some tea that Lady Anna had served him. A smile curled his lips.

Lady Anna hastily said, “I'm terrible at these sorts of tasks that other ladies excel in. I already know it must taste terrible. Why don't I send for a maid to pour something more palatable?”

“What? Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why?’” Lady Anna asked, confused.

My brother gently replied, “I quite enjoy the tea you pour for me,

and I find the time we spend together to be utterly blissful. Do you not agree?"

"Huh? What?" Lady Anna blurted, completely taken aback. The way she acted like a flustered maiden made her all the more adorable.

After catching a glimpse of the two, I slipped away so as not to disturb them, heading for the prince's office instead. On the way there, I happened upon the prince's chamberlain, who was preparing a pot of tea. An idea struck me, and I volunteered to complete the task in his stead. The chamberlain kindly allowed me to take over. This was my chance to have some of that special magic—to enjoy some time with the person most precious to me.

I read in a book that the best way to relieve a person's fatigue was to pour them strong tea, so I added extra leaves to the pot, enough to make the chamberlain go bug-eyed. It was difficult to measure how many leaves were too many. Reading it in a book was one thing, but actually performing the task yourself was another.

Nonetheless, I made enough for everyone in the prince's office to enjoy a cup. I was in an even more chipper mood than usual as I carried the pot with me. The chamberlain followed close behind, face pale as a sheet.

The pungent smell of the tea filled my nose as I fantasized about the time the two of us would spend together.



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by Yui

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